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Yu Shimizu

ILLUSTRATION

Asagi Tosaka

The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

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The
Demon Sword Master
of Excalibur Academy

...
“A p-present for me, Master?”
Assassin maid
SHARY
An assassin from the Realm of Shadows who serves the Undead King. Loves doughnuts.

"N-nothing. There's nothing wrong!"
"What's wrong, Leo?"
A girl from the orphanage
TESSERA
A girl from the orphanage Leonis once saved.
The reincarnated strongest Dark Lord
LEONIS
The Undead King who mysteriously wound up reincarnated as a ten-year-old boy.
A cool, if ditzy, older-sister type
RISELIA
A girl who became a minion of the Undead King. Leonis's guardian.

"Miss Regina!"
"Eat this! Drag Blast!"
With a rumbling sound, Regina loosed the most powerful shot she could muster!
A combat maid in charge of artillery
REGINA
Riselia's personal maid. Could she be hiding something...?

The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

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NEW YORK

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The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy
Yu Shimizu
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Characters

The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

Riselia

A girl who becomes Leonis's minion and, at the same time, his guardian.

Leonis

The Undead King and greatest Dark Lord. Was reborn after a thousand years but, for some reason, ended up in the form of a ten-year-old boy.

Regina

Riselia's personal maid.
Hiding a secret.

Sakuya

A girl from the Sakura Orchid, a place ravaged by the Voids.
A master swordswoman.

Elfiné

Leader of Leonis's platoon.
Heiress of the Phillet Company.

Shary

An assassin maid. One of Leonis's dark minions.
Loves sweets.

Blackas

One of Leonis's dark minions and prince of the Realm of Shadows. Very fluffy.

Tessera

A girl from the orphanage Riselia volunteers at.
Pines for Leonis.

PROLOGUE

“Leonis, this is your sword. It’s a weapon only you may wield…”

With those words, the girl handed the boy a sword. It was a dark blade, cloaked in radiant shadows. The object was one of the Arc Seven, a group of mythological Dark Lord–slaying weapons. Leonis Shealto, greatest swordsman of the Six Heroes, once wielded that Holy Sword and with it felled countless demons, dragons, evil spirits, and even Dark Lords. Having received the Goddess of Rebellion’s blessing, the blade was reborn, becoming a Demon Sword.

Fearful and timid, the boy took hold of the weapon.

“…?!”

The power of darkness that flowed into him from the hilt made his head spin in a fit of vertigo.

“Yes, the power of this Demon Sword is far too vast.” The girl’s fingers traced the edge of the weapon. “Thus, you shall only be able to draw it to—”

“To protect you and my kingdom,” the boy finished.

“Yes, that’s right. And…” The girl’s expression turned rueful. “When you_____me.”

The words she spoke seemed impossible for Leonis to accept.

“No… No, that’s not—,” he started, but the girl simply smiled gently and pressed her index finger to the boy’s lips, silencing him.

“Promise me, Leonis. Promise that someday, when the time comes, you will use that sword to…”

The girl’s fingertips melted into the gloom. Leonis reached out into the inky black, as if to grasp the fleeting vestiges of her voice.

“—lia, wait! Roselia!”

CHAPTER 1
A MINION AND HER DARK LORD

"Mm… Nn…"

Sunlight shone through the curtains and fell on the boy's eyelids, stirring him from sleep. He awoke to discover himself overcome with a lethargy not unlike muscle pain.

The boy was only ten years old. His features were cherubic and innocent, with skin still lustrous and smooth. Currently, his jet-black hair was mussed into what could only have been described as a textbook example of bed head.

Sleepily rubbing his eyes, the boy yawned. Drowsiness still lingered in his dark orbs. This was Leonis Death Magnus. Once known as the Undead King, he had been recently resurrected after a thousand years and now plotted to rebuild the Dark Lords' Armies. Using secret, forgotten sorcery, Leonis had waited in a kind of stasis until the time was right for his return, but when he'd awoken, he found his body had regressed to the form he'd worn when he was still just a boy.

…My word, having a human body is such a bothersome thing.

This Dark Lord, still clad in his pajamas, tossed about in his bed. His troublesome human form was quite prone to dreaming.

This time, the vision had been from before Leonis's reign as the Undead King.

…If I recall, it was when the Dark Lord of the olden times, Zol Vadis, invaded the continent.

Leonis squinted at the sunlight streaming in, but just as he tried to sit up…

"…?!"

He stiffened, and his eyes widened in surprise. Before him was a pair of breasts, rising and falling in a gentle, constant rhythm. The pajamas covering them were open slightly, giving Leonis a peek of the white underwear hidden beneath.

Swallowing despite himself, Leonis looked up…only to be confronted by the beautiful face of a sleeping girl. Her silvery hair shone in the golden rays of the morning. The girl's pink lips were parted as light, adorable breaths slipped from between them. Lovely eyelashes quivered as she slept, though her smooth, white skin remained undisturbed.

This was Riselia Ray Crystalia, a Holy Swordswoman of the Seventh Assault Garden's Excalibur Academy. She also happened to be the girl who'd awakened Leonis from his slumber within some old, forgotten ruins.

Snapping to attention, Leonis felt any remnants of sleepiness completely draining from his mind. He suddenly pushed the covers aside and sat up in his bed.

…My word, he thought.

Taking one long, deep breath, he stilled the hard beating of his heart. It was nothing more than a purely physiological reaction of his incorrigibly human body, after all. Through half-open lids, Leonis peered down at the face of the girl sleeping beside him. He then poked her soft cheek with the tip of his finger.

“Nnng… Mmm…” A carnal sigh escaped Riselia’s lips as the silver-haired girl’s eyes fluttered open. Her ice-blue eyes, like the surface of a clear lake, fixated themselves on Leonis.

“Good morning, Miss Selia,” he said in greeting.

“Ah, Leo… Good morning…,” the girl replied in a drowsy voice.

For being a vampire, this minion of mine seems to suffer from low blood pressure in the early hours of the day, Leonis thought.

“Miss Selia, what are you doing in my bed?” he inquired.

“Huh? Ah, erm…” At that question, Riselia looked away in a random direction.

“Don’t try to dodge the question by acting cute,” Leonis chided in exasperation.

Riselia herself had bought this bed. Originally, Leonis had asked for something more comfortable, like a stone coffin, but Riselia had firmly denied that request. Until recently, he’d been using Riselia’s bed, as her room was right next to his own.

“You looked like you were having a bad dream, Leo…,” she muttered.

Leonis held his tongue. He did have an idea as to what she was talking about. In his sleep, the Undead King had seen Roselia.

“Was I tossing in my sleep…?” Leonis asked.

“Yeah…”

Riselia sat up and placed a gentle hand on Leonis’s ruffled hair. Had this been a thousand years ago, treating a Dark Lord with such insolence would’ve been met with instant annihilation. As that age was far in the past, Leonis merely frowned at the surprising gesture, but he made no attempt to push the hand away.

Letting Selia pat him on the head didn’t feel all that bad. Perhaps because it reminded Leonis of the old days, when *she* used to do similar sorts of things.

“I’m fine. I just had a dream about the past, is all…,” Leonis admitted, turning away in embarrassment. That’s when he noticed there was a red tint to Riselia’s eyes.

“…Was that really all you came in here for?” he knowingly inquired.

“Huh?” Riselia cocked her head.

“You didn’t sneak into my bed to suck my blood?”

Riselia stiffened. Red irises were a sign of an elevated vampiric impulse. Leonis ran a hand over his neck but couldn't find any bite marks.

"It doesn't look like you bit me," he observed.

"Yes, well…I promised…I wouldn't do it without permission…"

"You really didn't do anything?" Leonis was somewhat surprised. The fact that Riselia hadn't partaken of his blood without permission meant she'd withstood an instinctual impulse in order to keep her word.

Impressive, Leonis admired internally.

Minions who'd recently become vampires were often assailed by an intense hunger for blood every few days. While Riselia was a Vampire Queen, the apex of her kind, the allure of that desire to feed was hard to resist. This was a girl who'd trained to fight the Voids for years, despite previously being unable to manifest a Holy Sword. Her mental fortitude was far stronger than that of the average human.

Even with such strength of mind, Leonis didn't doubt resisting the urge had been nothing short of torture for Riselia.

"Go ahead. You may suck my blood," Leonis declared, extending his index finger.

"C-can I…?" Riselia asked shakily.

"Yes, of course." Leonis nodded.

Some part of the Dark Lord in the body of a child wondered if perhaps he was overly kind to his minions. It wasn't as though Riselia had willingly joined the ranks of the undead, though. She'd laid down her life to protect Leonis's. Incapable of using holy magic, Leonis's only choice to save the valiant young woman had been to tap into the sorcery of the Realm of Death to turn her into what she was now.

…If all she requires is my blood, then I'll give her as much as she needs.

"Erm, I'll try to make sure it doesn't hurt," Riselia said.

"Yes, I'd appreciate that," Leonis replied.

There wasn't much discomfort involved when the girl sucked his blood, to begin with. It was only a tinge of sweet, intoxicating pain. Riselia's lips touched Leonis's finger, and…

Chomp.

Her small fangs penetrated his flesh with a bite that felt both bashful and playful.

"Nnn…mhaa…nnng… ♪ " Riselia's tongue coiled around Leonis's finger ecstatically as carnal moans began to escape her mouth. The alluring slurping sounds of her licking and suckling on his finger quietly echoed through the room.

"…Um, M-Miss Selia…," Leonis cut in.

"Nn…nhaat… (What…)?" She looked up at him with intoxicated eyes.

"You're being lewd."

"Aaaaah?!"

Riselia hurriedly freed Leonis's finger from her lips as her face flushed red with shame.

◆

“I-I’m sorry. I was just in a, erm, in a daze…”

“It’s all right. I know you’re not the vulgar type.”

“…Leo, you bully…”

Riselia’s eyes filled with tears, and her face turned red again as she stood up, donned an apron, and sauntered over to the kitchen.

Hmm. Maybe I did tease her a bit too much.

Of course, Leonis didn’t really entertain any ideas of Riselia being indecent. After all, only a pure, chaste maiden could’ve been resurrected as a Vampire Queen, the most powerful of all undead servants.

Riselia carried breakfast to the small table. On the plate were fresh-baked round buns served with milk, butter, and cheese. Next to these sat hard-boiled eggs, a salad made with fresh produce from the agricultural plant, corn soup, and a bunch of grapes.

As Riselia cut the whole wheat bread, its steam filled the room with a rich aroma that tickled Leonis’s nostrils. His old body hadn’t required food to survive, but he’d quickly adjusted his current form’s appetite. When it came to eating, his human body, for all its troublesome inconveniences, wasn’t so bad.

“You have to eat your veggies, too, Leo,” Riselia insisted, shoveling some salad onto Leonis’s plate.

“Please don’t fuss over me. You don’t need to treat me like a child,” he replied.

“But you *are* a child. Besides, you hardly eat any vegetables, right?”

There was probably something to be said about an undead girl fussing over someone else’s health.

Despite his true nature, Leonis looked like any other innocent, ten-year-old boy. Riselia often volunteered at the orphanage and helped tend to the children there, so she’d likely developed a habit of fretting over those younger than her. Left with little choice, Leonis forced himself to munch on the vegetables she’d placed in front of him, despite his distaste for the leafy things. Nodding in satisfaction, Riselia turned on the wall terminal with a flick of her finger.

“Looks like reconstruction on the commercial district is still taking a while…”

On the screen was a live video feed showing large piles of rubble and wreckage being towed away by equally sizable transport vehicles. The recent Void attack, while thwarted, had left large-scale destruction in its wake.

Voids were mysterious, unidentified life-forms that had supposedly appeared from the interstice of nothingness sixty-four years ago. Mankind had been pushed to the brink of extinction after their sudden arrival.

Their outward visages resembled monsters from Leonis's era, but nothing was known of their internal biology or makeup. One could only guess at where they'd come from or what their goal was in attacking humanity.

It'd seemed that Arakael Degradios, the Archsage and Void Lord who had led the recent Void assault on the Seventh Assault Garden, was knowledgeable about such things. Unfortunately…

He was completely eradicated by Dáinsleif, Leonis recalled with a hint of regret.

Rotten and decayed though Arakael had become, he was still one of the Six Heroes. Leonis hadn't been willing to risk holding back during the battle with him.

The official story was the Void Lord leading the Stampede had been suddenly destroyed when the mana furnace—the city's power source—spontaneously discharged as the creature was attempting to consume it. No one knew that a Dark Lord in the body of a child had been the one who'd brought the treelike monster to its end.

"Apparently, an investigative team dispatched from the capital is supposed to arrive this afternoon. Her Highness, Princess Altiria, will be leading it and delivering support in the form of manpower and supplies," Riselia explained.

A princess, eh…? That got Leonis thinking.

The prospect of meeting the royalty of the current era was an intriguing one. Once Leonis found Roselia's reincarnated body and rebuilt the Dark Lords' Armies, he would have to either fight this human empire or form an alliance with it.

This may be a good chance to learn about the influential figures of this world…

As far as most knew, Leonis was just a refugee boy. Such an individual couldn't casually approach a person of royalty. Leonis pondered how he'd get a chance to speak with the princess while he continued to eat his breakfast.

◆

10:30 Imperial Standard Time, near the coasts of what was once known as the Dark Continent.

The *Hyperion*, a personal warship of the Integrated Empire's royal family, was approaching the Seventh Assault Garden along with its three escort vessels. The ship's course was somewhat unusual, with many complex turns.

The warship was crewed with forty Holy Swordsmen and was equipped with anti-Void armaments, though this was not to say the craft was invulnerable. An encounter with a Void reef would sink the vessel just as easily as any other. As such, its crew had to make use of the ship's radar to

keep a watchful eye for areas where a reef might form and circumvent them.

“Your Highness, we are on course to arrive at the Seventh Assault Garden on time.”

“Understood. Stay the course, then.”

Standing at the main bridge, which offered a view of the sea, was a young girl. She regarded the report from the knight captain of the royal guard with a composed nod. Her jade-green eyes were willful and determined, and her blond hair appeared as though sunshine had been weaved into its locks.

While still a child of twelve, this girl was the one in command, for she was Altiria Ray O’ltriese, fourth princess of the Integrated Empire. Altiria was the youngest daughter of House O’ltriese, one of the three royal factions that led the Integrated Empire. The empire itself was the human federation that served as the core of the mobile Assault Gardens.

Sitting on Altiria’s lap was a white creature that resembled a puffball. While clearly alive, the little thing was not an animal. Perhaps as testament to that fact, its white fur let out a faint glow, and careful inspection revealed a gleaming, red gemstone embedded in the creature’s forehead.

This being was a spirit known as a Carbuncle. It was a kind of mana life-form that had existed in ancient times. The fact that Altiria could communicate with a spirit was proof she was a member of the royal line.

“Your Highness, about your visit to the urban area…,” one of the knights began with the utmost respect. “I believe showing yourself to the citizens would be far too dangerous.”

“But it’s the duty of those of regal lineage,” Altiria replied with a tone that came across as very mature for her age.

“Still, Your Highness, the royal house has many enemies.”

It was indeed true that the empire had many enemies. Factions of nobles from the old regime; a secret society of merchants known as the Isha Weapon Firm; armed terrorists led by the demi-human population; revolutionary advocates; and even a doomsday cult that worshipped the Voids as saviors of mankind. Even with the presence of Excalibur Academy, there was no guarantee the Seventh Assault Garden was truly safe.

“It seems completely absurd that mankind would fight among itself when we are faced with a threat as dire as the Voids,” Altiria stated.

“Yes, Your Highness, I feel the same way, but…” The honest-looking knight captain trailed off.

Altiria heaved a light sigh. “I understand. Then I will have my speech at the town square moved to the ship.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.” The knight captain bowed his head respectfully.

“But the evening gala won’t be a problem, right?”

“Correct. The party will be under Excalibur Academy’s management. The guests’ identities have all been confirmed.”

The gathering was a social event where the citizens of the Seventh Assault Garden could board the *Hyperion* and hear the princess speak in person. The students of Excalibur Academy were invited to attend, of course, as were influential figures among the citizens. This was so Altiria and her escorts, as representatives of the capital, could collect the opinions of those who lived in the floating fortress of cutting-edge technology and convey them accurately to Camelot.

Altiria was greatly looking forward to the chance to speak to her people directly.

What's more, my sister should be somewhere in the Seventh Assault Garden…, thought the princess. This sibling had left before Altiria herself had even been born. She didn't know what her sister looked like or even her name.

I doubt I will get to meet her, but…

If her sister had awakened to the power of a Holy Sword and was attending the academy, then perhaps there was a chance they could reconnect. Altiria hugged the spirit resting on her lap, a hopeful expectation filling her heart.

Before long, the massive artificial island city came into sight.

◆

"Bloody Sword—Activate!"

Shing!

A blade came crashing down, smashing a skeleton soldier to bits.

"You're not done yet."

"…!"

Riselia's voice echoed throughout the indoor training ground. She wheeled around to slash off an enemy's head. Even decapitated, however, the skeletal knight charged forward and grabbed at the girl. Undead soldiers had no weak points. Just like the Voids, they had to be completely obliterated to be truly defeated.

Enemies like skeletons were a difficult match for Riselia's Holy Sword because it took the shape of a thin blade. A bony hand reached out to grasp the girl's slender neck, but the next moment, Riselia twisted her body by using her left leg as her axis.

"You little…!"

She delivered a kick with all the strength she could muster. Her argent hair billowed out with the motion. The skeleton was split in two and crumpled to the ground. Such a grappling technique delivered with a vampire's enhanced strength behind it was stronger than most blunt weapons. Even so, pulling off that sort of maneuver should have been too challenging for most people.

Riselia was adept with more than just a sword; her martial arts capabilities were quite impressive as well. A brilliant defensive reaction like

the one she'd just employed against the skeleton was proof enough of that. She'd clearly spent a long time honing her skills.

Bringing her right leg back down, Riselia pushed off the ground and dashed forward to slash with her sword. This attack, empowered with the girl's mana, crushed the head of a beast-type skeleton.

"Haah, haah, haah…" Though Riselia panted, there wasn't a drop of sweat on her body. That was to be expected, as she was undead.

"I can still keep going!" Riselia turned around, flashing a brilliant smile at Leonis.

Holy Swords were a miraculous power granted to select members of mankind by the planet as a means of opposing the Voids. These weapons took on a variety of forms in accordance with their wielder's personality. One might be a broadsword, while another could be a katana, a bow, an ax, a staff, or even a gun. Each held a unique power, and all were fundamentally different from the sorcery Leonis used.

For years, Riselia had sought the strength to protect others but had been unable to awaken to the power of a Holy Sword. Recently, however, that had finally changed.

She's better than expected. Leonis smiled to himself. Should she continue to improve, she could very well become a weapon of my defense.

Though the power of his sorcery remained intact, Leonis was still in the fragile body of a child. He could use his sorcery to reinforce his body, but even that had limits.

It might be time to teach her some first-order spells.

A Vampire Queen was the highest grade of undead minion, graced not only with powerful physical prowess but also a supply of mana and the ability to use magic on her own. Riselia's skill with a blade may have fallen short compared to Sakuya Sieglinde, her junior and another member of the eighteenth platoon, but she could certainly match her if she became a Spellblade, a type of warrior capable of wielding magic.

Raising a talented minion to her full potential is satisfying, Leonis thought, his lips curling upward in a vicious smile.

"Leo, are you thinking something bad?" Riselia looked at him, knitting her eyebrows.

"I—I am not."

"Your big sis can tell when you are," she declared, staring at him fixedly.

"A-anyway… Next up, I'll have you face a skeleton ogre," Leonis said in an attempt to change the subject. He waved his staff, and the bones of the scattered practice enemies began to gather together, forming the shape of a large, hulking giant.

"Wh-what is that?!" Riselia exclaimed, incredulous.

"Defeating it will conclude your training for today," Leonis declared.

"Whaaaat?!"

As imposing as it may have looked, Leonis knew a skeleton ogre wasn't the kind of opponent to give Riselia any trouble.

“Wait, Leo, where are you going?!”

“The library. I finally had my ID issued, after all.”

“…Aaaah, Leooooo!”

Leonis left the training facility with the sound of clashing metal at his back.

◆

Leonis departed from where Riselia had been practicing combat and made his way to the academy’s library. His plan was to study any ancient books and tomes that had been discovered within ruins. He was curious to learn about the magic technology that had rapidly developed in the few decades since the initial Void invasion and the commencement of the Assault Garden project. There had been some history on the subject available in his portable terminal.

The truly desirable details were contained within ancient tomes laced with mana, especially those truly rare ones classified as grimoires. Those sorts of books had been made impossible to copy digitally, which meant Leonis had to read them firsthand in the library.

I’ll need a great deal of intelligence if I’m to re-form the Dark Lords’ Armies.

The Dark Lords’ Armies had previously underestimated the importance of intelligence and information, a mistake that had brought those forces to ruin. Leonis couldn’t afford to make that error a second time.

The academy’s library was a rectangular building surrounded by alabaster walls. It was quite small in comparison to the Rognas Kingdom’s Vault of Wisdom, but then again, most modern books were digital.

Leonis held up the ID card he’d been issued and passed through the library’s gate. Even at this relatively early hour, there were already a few students in the library. A gaggle of girls noticed Leonis and hurriedly began whispering things like “Look at that boy!” and “So cute. ♪ ”

Ignoring them, Leonis went straight for the gate to the inner archive. He held up his ID card again, but this time, the gate flashed red. A small, beeping alarm sounded.

“What’s wrong?” Leonis cocked his head questioningly.

“Ordinary students are not authorized entry past this point.”

Before Leonis’s very eyes, a small, owllike creature appeared. It was glowing a bluish hue.

This isn’t some common animal. Being a Dark Lord, Leonis’s keen eyes quickly discerned the nature of the owl.

“It can’t be…a spirit?!” Leonis couldn’t help but exclaim out loud.

Spirits were mana life-forms born of the energy emitted by the moon.

So even in an age where gods have perished, the spirits have survived…

“Are you some sort of gatekeeper?” Leonis asked.

“I am the custodian of this vault.”

“I am a student of this academy. Can you let me pass?”

The spirit stiffened for a moment, then stated, **“You lack the right and authority to pass.”**

“What? Is this card not enough?”

“To enter the vault, you require the administration bureau’s approval.”

“…I see. How do I apply for their approval, then?” Leonis inquired, growing impatient.

“Submit a written request to the administration bureau. If they judge there to be no issue with the submission, they will grant approval within several weeks’ time,” the owl creature recited.

“Several weeks…” Leonis groaned. The Undead King was used to waiting, but he was currently registered as a refugee. Would a request from someone like him even get approved?

This is bothersome, Leonis thought. Reducing the spirit to ashes would be a simple matter for one such as him, of course, but that would cause undue commotion.

I could have Shary infiltrate the archive, considered Leonis. No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than…

“Hey there, kid. ♪ ”

Leonis’s vision suddenly went dark. Someone had approached him from behind and covered his eyes.

“Heh-heh. Guess who? ♪ ” asked the voice.

Squish. Leonis felt a pair of sizable bosoms press against his back.

“…Miss Regina, please. We’re in public,” replied Leonis, doing his best to maintain his composure as his heart began racing.

“Hmm. Y’know, you should play dumb and relish the sensation of my boobs against you a little longer, kid. It’s only polite.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with politeness,” Leonis whispered in exasperation, and he turned around.

Standing there was a petite, beautiful girl with flowing blond hair tied in pigtails. This was Regina Mercedes, Riselia’s maid and a fellow member of her platoon. She was good-humored and liked to bake tasty, homemade cookies. Unfortunately, she also had a nasty habit of teasing Leonis as she’d just done. She smiled, looking at Leonis with green, gemlike eyes.

“What are you doing here, Regina?”

“I came here to return some footage I borrowed,” she replied, retrieving the object in question from her bag. “What are you doing here, kid? There’s no naughty magazines in the library.”

“Th-that’s not why I came!” Leonis exclaimed, astonished. “I just wanted to borrow some books.”

Regina turned her eyes to the spirit blocking their way at the gate.

“…Are you trying to get into the basement’s archive?” Regina looked down at Leonis’s face suspiciously.

“Um, yes…,” he answered.

What should I do?

Surely a ten-year-old boy like Leonis having an interest in ancient tomes was highly unusual. The Dark Lord fell silent while he pondered an excuse.

"I just thought something there might help me regain my memories…," Leonis finally said.

"Your memories?"

"The room I was trapped in was sealed with ancient text. So I thought that, if I could read up on some ancient writing, I might find a clue…"

The report submitted to the administration bureau had listed Leonis Magnus as an amnesiac refugee child abducted by the Voids. Researching the ruins in the hopes of reclaiming his memories might've come across as a bit zealous for a kid, but it was the best Leonis could muster in the moment.

Regina squatted down to meet him at eye level.

"I get it. Not having your memories must make you feel pretty anxious and scared." She placed a hand on Leonis's head and ruffled his hair gently. "All right. Let me handle this."

Regina nodded and got to her feet, turning to face the owl.

"Spirit, please let him in on my authority."

"Regina Mercedes is not approved to—"

"Oh, c'mon. Don't be such a stick in the mud. ♪ " Regina purred, tapping the owl's head with a finger.

"Not…approved…to— Understood."

The warning light turned off, and the gate clicked open.

Did she just interfere with the spirit?! Leonis was stunned.

Even with his mastery of the arcane arts, Leonis couldn't have managed a trick like that. The only ones capable of meddling with spirits were the Princess Priestesses who had the ability to call on their power.

"What did you do just now?" Leonis asked.

"Just a little something," Regina replied. She brought her index finger to her lips and whispered, "I can use the spirits' power a little, is all. The other members of the eighteenth platoon already know about it, but keep it a secret, okay?"

"So you're a spirit user?"

"No, no. It's nothing major. C'mon, let's go."

◆

Past the gate was a door to an elevator, a magical apparatus that made use of advanced gravity control magic. As soon as Leonis set foot in it, the elevator began a quiet descent. Necrozoa's Death Hold had had similar devices, but they had been far more primitive mechanisms that required skeletons using pulleys and ropes.

This is impressive technology. I can see why regular sorcery ended up forgotten, Leonis thought. More than that, however, he was still concerned with the owl spirit.

"Regina, that owl from earlier was a spirit, right?" he asked, turning around to face the girl riding in the elevator with him.

“Yup, it’s one of the Phillet Company’s Artificial Elementals,” she explained.

“Artificial Elementals?” The unfamiliar term left Leonis stumped.

“Spirits created using magical technology. Unlike normal spirits, they can only handle simple tasks.”

“Artificially creating spirits…”

There’d been research into magic capable of creating spirits during Leonis’s era, too. It had ended in abject failure, however.

They’ve successfully created spirits, and they have them provide various services?

It was an astounding accomplishment, but it did beg the question of what happened to naturally occurring spirits.

“What happened to the non-artificial spirits?”

“Oh, you mean Origin Spirits,” Regina said. “They’re spoken of in legends, but I hear they’ve taken to only rarely revealing themselves ever since the Void invasion began. Apparently, some still exist in ancient forests, but not much is really known about that.”

“…I see,” replied Leonis. He’d expected as much.

This means that spirits still exist as a whole, though.

Unlike humans, spirits knew no natural life span. A higher-order one capable of communication could inform Leonis about everything that’d happened while he’d been sealed. The Undead King made sure to make a mental note of that.

After a long trip deep underground, the elevator finally came to a halt.

“This is incredible…,” Leonis uttered upon emerging.

“Yeah, this is my first time seeing it, too…,” Regina added.

A large cylinder stood at the center of the room, lording over its surroundings. Within it sat countless books, contained in transparent cases. There looked to be hundreds of volumes housed within the tube.

“What are you looking for?” Regina asked.

“Well, there’s a lot more books than I imagined. I suppose I’ll just start with whatever looks right…,” Leonis muttered.

With no real starting place, Leonis picked a random assortment of volumes with information from before the Void invasion that wasn’t recorded in the public database. He reached out and coiled a Shadow Hand around a few works.

“Ah, kid…,” Regina interrupted.

“What is it?”

“You can read these books here, but you can’t take them out. I fooled the spirit upstairs, but the books are tracked by some other system.”

Hmm. I suppose that stands to reason.

The tomes were stored under such heavy protection, it made sense students weren’t permitted to simply walk off with them.

“What about transcribing the contents and leaving with those?” Leonis inquired.

“That’s fine, I think…,” Regina replied.

Leonis took a pen from the breast pocket of his uniform. It wasn’t one of the bone pens he regularly used. This had come from the academy’s school store and automatically produced ink. He then summoned a piece of parchment from within his shadow and chanted a spell. The utensil sprang to life and began moving on its own, copying down the contents of the ancient texts.

This was an automatic writing spell, Auto Record. Leonis had originally devised it in order to mass-produce magic scrolls.

“Is that your Holy Sword’s ability?” Regina asked, peeking at what Leonis was doing.

“Something like that,” Leonis answered.

With the spell activated, copying the books would take around an hour.

“All right. I’ll head back then, kid.”

“Very well. Thank you very much, Miss Regina.”

Leonis bowed his head in gratitude, and Regina boarded the elevator and ascended after waving good-bye.

◆

The Seventh Assault Garden’s sixth ward was also known as the special demi-human protection ward. It was an artificial environment consisting of a broad-leaved tree forest surrounding a freshwater lake maintained with desalinated water from the ocean.

Fewer than twenty thousand citizens lived in this ward, a thirtieth of the Seventh Assault Garden’s total population. The majority of them were demi-humans who’d been segregated from the rest of the populace.

Demi-humans was a collective term for the beastmen, elves, and fiend races who had lived in the forests, mountains, and islands before the empire began the Human Integration Project. Sixty-four years ago, demi-humans had been driven to near extinction by the Void invasion, much like their human counterparts. Under the pretext of protection, they’d been absorbed into the empire.

In that man-made forest where the demi-humans made their residence sat a temple so overgrown with vegetation that it resembled an abandoned house. There, a group of figures wrapped in ashen overcoats stood gathered. They numbered twenty altogether, and each was armed. An air of unease hung over the crumbling structure.

“As you all know, the fourth princess, Altiria, and her battleship, the *Hyperion*, are set to dock at this Assault Garden for a motivational rally,” stated a low voice reminiscent of a growl.

The speaker was a massive man so muscular and well built that his physique was clearly visible even through his overcoat. The face beneath his hood was that of a black lion.

This was Bastea Colossuf. A descendant of the Shamar clan, a group considered to be one of the most warlike and belligerent demi-human tribes,

Bastea served as leader of the radical militant organization, the Sovereign Wolves. Under his guidance, the faction had performed countless acts of terrorism against the empire.

Ever since the Parliament Hall occupation incident, which had resulted in over two hundred deaths, the Sovereign Wolves had started wandering from one Assault Garden to another, lying in wait as they trained new recruits and sympathizers. They had arrived in the Seventh Assault Garden some eight months ago and were hiding from the watchful eye of the administration bureau in the forest of the demi-human protection ward, where they were harder to track. Concealed therein, the revolutionaries sharpened their claws as they awaited a chance to strike.

“Aaah, I look forward to it, I do. We’ll finally get to butcher some cheeky humans,” said one small beastman—a werewolf assassin—eagerly licking his lips.

“But can we really trust that woman, Lord Bastea?” asked a hulking figure standing with her back against the wall.

There was a large, sharp horn sticking out of her forehead, a clear indicator that the dissenting woman was of the raging demon race.

“She gave us power. That’s an undeniable fact.”

“He’s right, Elza. We have the power of Holy Swords now, just like those humans!”

“Heh-heh-heh… Those aren’t Holy Swords,” came a new voice, prompting everyone to turn and look at the speaker.

“…?!”

“Those are *Demon Swords*, items granted to you by the goddess.”

At some point, a beautiful, enchanting woman with dark skin had appeared at the entrance of the temple. While she looked to be in her twenties, appearances were unreliable when dealing with a dark elf like her. Clutched in her grip was a pitch-black sword that emanated an eerie, unsettling aura.

“There you are, Sharnak, you witch,” Bastea spat.

Sharnak of the Everdark Forest had first appeared during a secret meeting of the Sovereign Wolves several weeks before the Void Lord’s Stampede on the Seventh Assault Garden. While the rebel cell had been suspicious of the dark elf at first, they’d been quick to accept the promise of power she offered by way of the goddess’s blessing.

The dark elf granted an ability similar to the miraculous Holy Swords that the planet had bestowed upon the lowly human race to those in whom she saw potential.

“How are you liking the power of the goddess? Does it please you?” Sharnak smiled confidently at the others.

“Why are you cooperating with us?” Bastea pressed.

“Because the goddess wills me to do so.”

“The goddess, eh?” growled Bastea in answer.

I don't trust this woman. Bastea's intuition as a beastman was warning him that this dark elf spoke with the tongue of a viper.

Still, the power of the Demon Swords she gave us is real enough.

The Sovereign Wolves weren't in a position to turn down help based on who was providing it. All that mattered was freeing their kin held captive in the capital.

"The preparations for hijacking the ship are already underway. You can leave everything to me," Sharnak cooed.

"If an imperial battleship were that easy to take, we'd have done it already," Bastea told her.

"I will summon the powers of the Nothingness," the witch replied.

"What?" Bastea furrowed his brow.

A black miasma began seeping from the blade of the Demon Sword in Sharnak's hands.

"The Nothingness that serves the goddess will guide your way."

CHAPTER 2
THE PRINCESS'S ARRIVAL

It took a full hour to finish transcribing the books.

Leonis left the library wearing the most innocent face he could manage after having created copies of ancient tomes. Now he wanted nothing more than to find a nice quiet corner to begin his reading.

Upon leaving the building, Leonis pulled out a small device given to him by the academy. When he tapped on the screen, the terminal sensed the faint mana in his fingertips and activated. He wasn't quite used to operating this machine yet, but it was quite the convenient little thing. By sliding his finger across the screen, he scrolled through a digital copy of his academy curriculum.

Hmm. So I have a classroom lecture on group tactics theory next…

Having commanded armies in the past as a Dark Lord, such a lecture seemed quite promising to Leonis. Understanding how human tactics had changed over the last millennium was useful. On top of that, a student's lecture attendance was closely monitored. If Leonis ever skipped a class, Riselia was sure to learn of it and get angry with him.

"…I suppose I can always read the books later," Leonis whispered to himself.

Just as he turned to make for the classroom ward, however…

"Ah, there he is! Leoooo!"

"M-Millet, don't shout…"

Leonis heard the high-pitched voices of several children calling after him.

"…?"

Doing an about-face, he saw a girl who looked to be five or six years old running toward him across the park lawn. The child had a lively face, her hazelnut hair was in pigtails, and she wore a short skirt.

Who's that?

Suspicious, Leonis looked around and spied two other children following the girl. One of them was a gangly, bespectacled boy who looked to be the same age, while the other was a slightly older girl. The oldest of the three had slender, doll-like limbs and shoulder-length black hair. Moreover, Leonis actually knew who she was.

On the day of the Void Stampede, he'd met her when he visited Phrenia's orphanage. She'd been the oldest child there.

Tessera, I believe? Leonis recalled.

She'd proven herself to be quite a brave child, for she'd dared to ask Leonis to protect Riselia after witnessing a sliver of his terrifying power. If

Tessera was here, then the other kids with her were likely from the orphanage as well.

What could they be doing here?

Part of Excalibur Academy's premises were open to the public. While there was a strict identity check necessary to enter the sections of the academy used by the students, the cafeteria and exercise facilities adjacent to the park were available for anyone.

The orphanage was a long a walk from the academy, though. It was one thing if they could use a vehicle, but Leonis couldn't imagine children making such a long trip on foot.

"Haah, haah… I finally found you…," Millet said, gasping for air as she came to a stop in front of Leonis.

Soon after, the other two caught up to her. Clearly, they'd been looking for him, though Leonis could only guess at the reason.

"Ah… Hmm, err…!" Tessera tried to say something from her spot behind the younger girl.

"…?" Leonis cocked his head.

"C'mon, Tessera, you've got something to give to Leonis, right?" Millet urged, lightly pushing Tessera forward.

"Y-yeah…" Tessera stepped closer and looked up at Leonis as if steeling her nerves. "I… Leonis… I… Have this…"

She held out a small bag.

"…What's this?" he asked.

"It's, erm, a thank-you gift."

"…A thank-you gift?"

"Yes. Thank you so, so much for protecting the orphanage!" Tessera offered the little satchel to Leonis and bobbed her head in a bow.

"I saw you from the window. You were awesome!" Millet said excitedly. "You took out those Voids one after another!"

"I—I saw it, too. B-but I was a little scared…," the bespectacled boy added.

"Linze, you're being rude to Leo!" Millet chided, landing a small, bouncy punch on his head.

"I didn't do anything you should be thankful for…" Leonis shook his head. "Protecting people is a Holy Swordsman's duty." Leonis had rather nonchalantly just said something he didn't believe in the slightest. Truth be told, he'd only protected the orphanage on a whim. If it hadn't been a place Riselia—his minion—held so dear, he wouldn't have even considered doing something that risked exposing his identity to protect it.

“I, erm, hope you like sweets…,” Tessera stammered with a flustered expression.

“Thank you, Tessera.” Leonis accepted the gift. Instantly, he caught the pleasant smell of cookies.

“Y-you remembered…my name,” Tessera whispered in a voice so meek Leonis couldn’t hear it, and her cheeks turned rosy.

While a little misshapen, the cookies had clearly been otherwise well made. Leonis took a bite out of one. It tasted a touch too sweet for him, but that was likely just a matter of preference.

“It’s good. Just the right kind of sweet,” Leonis commented, offering his honest opinion.

“…R-really? Th-that’s good.” Tessera smiled bashfully.

“Hey, Leo, Tessera picked out the best cookies from a batch she baked for you!” Millet told him excitedly.

“…M-Millet!” Linze poked her in the ribs.

“Hmm, you came all this way just to give this to me?” Leonis asked.

“That’s right!” Millet said, puffing out her chest as though to boast for some reason.

“Ah, erm, that’s not all we came here for, um…,” Tessera muttered hastily.

“We came to see the *Hyperion* at the port!” Linze exclaimed with glittering eyes.

Hyperion… If Leonis recalled correctly, it was the name of the ship the princess was set to arrive on for her visit.

“Y-yes, and while we were here, we wondered how you were doing, so…,” Tessera added timidly.

“You’re interested in warships?” Leonis inquired.

“Yeah!” Linze said excitedly. “It’s the capital’s newest vessel. A battleship made for anti-Void combat! It’s got the first magic catapult loaded onto it, and—”

“There’s gonna be a parade welcoming the princess near the ship,” Tessera added hurriedly.

…So that’s why.

Putting aside Linze’s barrage of jargon, Millet and Tessera had come to visit the princess.

“Tessera wanted to invite you to come with us,” Millet said cheerily.

“I-if you don’t mind…,” Tessera amended, her words petering out.

Hmm…

Phrenia was likely far too busy running the orphanage to escort a few of them to a parade. That said, the children were clearly eager to walk around town on their own, so Leonis decided it befit him as a Holy Swordsman to escort them.

In all honesty, the parade didn’t interest Leonis in the slightest. When he was the Undead King, he was worshipped and celebrated by a number of

assorted heretical cults throughout the land. Such idolization quickly grew unpleasant, though, so he'd abolished them.

I admit this world's royalty and warships do pique my interest, however, Leonis thought, hiding an evil smile.

Setting aside the unlikelihood that Leonis would have a chance to meet with any member of the royal family, researching one of this age's cutting-edge weapons wasn't a bad use of his time. Attending on his own could arouse suspicion, but with the children following him, no one was likely to raise an eyebrow.

"Sure." Leonis nodded.

Tessera whispered a small "Yay!" Attending the festivities meant Leonis would be skipping his lectures for the day, but that was fine. Riselia was less likely to get mad at him for doing something for the kids from the orphanage.

Why am I even concerned about a minion getting mad at me?

"Then let's go! Forward march!" Millet theatrically swung a branch she'd picked up somewhere and started walking toward the port.

◆

"…Where did Leo go off to?"

Having finished her lectures in the classroom ward, Riselia looked around for the boy but couldn't find him anywhere.

I thought it'd be nice to have lunch together…

Leonis's group tactics lecture should've been in the same building as Riselia's class. She tried calling his communication device, but there was no reply. Leonis had mentioned going to the library that morning, so Riselia wondered if perhaps he was still there. Unfortunately, there was no sign of him in that building, either. Leonis was the only ten-year-old Holy Swordsman in the academy, so Riselia had thought he'd stand out and be easy to spot.

I hope no one kidnapped him or something… Riselia was suddenly struck by a rather odd thought.

It was no secret that a lot of the girls around the academy thought Leonis was very cute. Riselia wouldn't have been surprised to learn a classmate had decided to snatch him away.

Leonis Magnus. A mysterious boy found sealed in an ancient ruin. Outwardly, he appeared to be an adorable child, but his true identity was that of an ancient mage who'd turned Riselia into his vampire minion. He fought not with a Holy Sword but by using the power of ancient sorcery and a Demon Sword. Those strange abilities had saved Riselia from the massive Void Lord who had kidnapped her, leaving no trace of the monstrous tree-thing behind when Leonis was finished.

At times, he was incredibly mature, but there were other moments when he acted like a boy his age… For some reason, Riselia found she just

couldn’t leave him alone. No matter how strong he was, she saw him no differently than how she viewed the children at the orphanage.

Maybe he’s having lunch on his own? Considering that possibility, Riselia headed toward the cafeteria when something else caught her attention.

“…Hmm?”

Riselia spotted one of her teammates squatting beneath the building’s staircase. The girl’s brilliant blue hair was cut in a shoulder-length, boyish style, and her piercing blue eyes were quite breathtaking.

She didn’t wear the academy’s uniform but was instead clad in traditional garb from Sakura Orchid. Normally, that would have, of course, been a violation of academy regulations, but a special exception had been made in this girl’s case.

She was a skilled swordswoman who, despite being a first-year, held the record for slaying large-type Voids. Her name was Sakuya Sieglinde, and she was sitting in front of a large, black lump.

“…Sakuya?” Riselia called out to her friend.

“Mm? Oh, Riselia…” Sakuya turned to look at her senior classmate and bowed her head in greeting.

Getting a closer look, Riselia realized the black lump Sakuya was squatting by was actually a very large dog.

“Hmm, where did this guy come from?” Riselia asked, furrowing her brow.

“Seems he wandered onto the academy’s premises. I thought he looked hungry, so I decided to feed him,” Sakuya explained, tearing a bun she’d gotten from the cafeteria and presenting it to the black dog. He sniffed it a few times before helping himself.

“He’s…a bit large for a stray.” Riselia descended the staircase and eyed the dog carefully.

Something gave her the feeling she’d seen this animal before, but exactly where and when eluded her.

“Do you think he’s someone’s pet?” Riselia wondered aloud.

“Probably. I can’t see him being a stray. He gives off a certain noble aura,” Sakuya agreed.

“Now that you mention it, I guess he kind of does.”

The large beast’s fur was as black and sleek as the ebon of night.

“It looks similar to a breed of blood wolf, but…” Riselia crouched toward the dog and cocked her head.

A blood wolf was a species created as a result of genetic engineering, a mixture of a large-breed dog and a dire wolf. They were mostly used as military hounds. There was an upperclassman with a Holy Sword capable of controlling packs of dogs. Riselia wondered if perhaps this animal belonged to them.

“We should probably report this to the bureau,” Riselia declared.

“Right…” Sakuya nodded, placing a hand on the dog’s head. “Until we find his owner, I shall christen him with a name. He will be Fluffymaru the Black.”

The black dog growled in apparent dissatisfaction.

“He doesn’t seem to like it,” Riselia pointed out.

“…Mm. Really? I think it’s a fine name.”

“You can’t just name random dogs you find outside, Sakuya,” Riselia chided as she rose to her feet. “By the way, have you seen Leo?”

“Oh, the kid? Haven’t seen him around here,” Sakuya replied.

“Oh…” Riselia sighed. “Where could he have gone to?”

“Miss Riselia, aren’t you being a bit overprotective? He’s a Holy Swordsman in his own right.”

“Overprotective…? Y-you think…?” Riselia considered Sakuya’s observation.

It was then that her device let out a beeping alert to inform her she’d received a new message.

“…Ah, Leo?!” Immediately, Riselia’s voice grew happier, at which Sakuya simply shrugged.

◆

Leonis arrived at the seventh block of the naval port. He hadn’t walked there of course, instead making use of the linear rail that ran under and across the Assault Garden. Had it been just Leonis, he could’ve used his sorcery to move across the city through the shadows, but taking three other people along for the ride was impossible.

Some of the linear rail network had been destroyed by Arakael Degradios, the one who’d long ago fused with the Holy Tree. While main supply routes had been hurriedly restored, less important railways were still under repair. Heavy machinery was being used to clear out flooded underground sectors.

“This was my first time riding the linear rail,” Tessera said from her spot next to Leonis.

“Really?” he asked.

“I don’t leave the refugee sector often…”

Twenty minutes or so later, the self-propelled magical technology train had reached the port station. The four children took an elevator to the surface, where their eyes were instantly greeted by the blue sky and a number of weapon factories lined along the harbor.

“That’s the seventh factory! That’s where they produce anti-Void tactical weapons!” Linze continued to offer excited commentary.

“Leo doesn’t care about that,” Millet scolded him.

“Th-that’s not true. Right?”

“No, I think it’s fascinating,” Leonis assured him.

He already knew from Blackas’s report that the Assault Garden had such foundries, but seeing them with his own eyes conveyed their scale all the more.

This is larger than the famed Tyrant King of Indores’s Treasury, Leonis thought as he walked toward the naval port.

“Th-that over there… Amazing, it’s the real thing!” Linze exclaimed, pointing at the harbor. A massive castle was moored where the young boy had indicated.

So that’s Hyperion…

Leonis was left speechless at the sight of the vessel. It couldn't have been more different from how he'd first pictured it.

It makes the Wild Hunt look like a dinghy by comparison…

The *Wild Hunt* was a massive warship built to resemble an undead dragon. During Leonis's reign as the Undead King, it had struck terror into the hearts of the human kingdom's soldiers. Appearing from the fog with countless undead warriors aboard, the mighty boat had been a fearsome sight to behold.

However, the sheer scale of the floating fortress that now bobbed before Leonis's eyes rivaled the size of the Dragon Lord Veira's mobile fortress.

"The *Hyperion* is the sister vessel of the *Endymion*, and it's equipped with a Void-probing system. It's even capable of sailing in open seas!" Linze detailed proudly.

Millet and Tessera stood frozen in place, clearly in awe at the dignified visage of the ship.

…I would like at least two battleships of this size once I've reformed the Demon Lords' Armies, Leonis thought. This ship must be mine at all costs.

◆

The plaza that looked out on the harbor was alive with a large crowd of people. Food stands had been set up, and an orchestra was performing in the nearby park.

"Something smells nice," Tessera said cheerfully.

Mature as she may have been, Tessera was still an eight-year-old girl. Apparently, someone was grilling fish caught in the nearby waters.

"I don't have a lot of money, though…," Millet said dejectedly.

"Me neither…," Linze joined in.

"Don't worry, I got a lot of allowance," Tessera said, producing a card with a very older-sister-like air about her.

"Are you sure, Tessera?" Millet asked.

"Yeah, I helped out a lot around the orphanage," she replied.

Before she could say or do anything else, however, Leonis took hold of Tessera's hand.

"Leo?" she asked in confusion.

"Let me pay for it," he insisted. He took out his terminal, which also functioned as a credit card.

"Really?!" Millet exclaimed with sparkling eyes.

"Huh?! No, you don't have to…" Tessera shrank back modestly.

"A child needn't be so reserved," Leonis declared.

"But, Leonis, you're a kid, too…," Tessera retorted diffidently.

Leonis cleared his throat awkwardly. "I am a Holy Swordsman, so I'm not quite as pressed for money."

The truth was he would've been far more financially secure if the hoard of Reidoa gold coins stored in the vault kept in his shadow were accepted as

currency. Unfortunately, such things were no longer in circulation, making them little more than worthless trinkets.

"Four fish skewers, please. Some juice for each of us, too," Leonis told the stall owner.

"Put your terminal here, please," instructed the man running the stand.

"Like this?" Leonis asked, bashing the terminals together lightly.

"No, not like that," the man corrected, frowning with exasperation. Tessera smiled and gently giggled at the scene.

"Thank you, Leo…"

With their food and drinks, the four of them sat on a bench in the plaza. The fish's skin was crispy from being cooked over coals, giving it a rather appealing taste. Tessera and the two younger children happily stuffed their cheeks.

Leonis suddenly looked down at his terminal. When he'd paid with credit earlier, he noticed he'd received a number of messages. He thought Riselia was mad with him for skipping a lecture, but they were all concernedly asking where he was.

…That was wrong of me. Leonis groaned to himself. I should at least get her a gift to apologize.

"Hey, look at that…" Millet got to her feet after finishing her skewer.

She pointed to the plaza ahead, where a group of Holy Swordsmen were holding a public performance.

"Let's go see!" Millet proclaimed, grabbing Linze by the arm and running toward the plaza.

"Ah, wait…!" Tessera stood up hurriedly. "Ah, I'm sorry, I have to go after them…"

"Go ahead," Leonis said with a nod. "I'll stay here and look around some of the shops until you get back."

"See you later!" Tessera bowed to Leonis and took off after the two younger children.

Leonis watched her hurry away before whispering an incantation. "Come forth, my servant of the shadows."

A black mist appeared out of thin air and silently clung to Tessera. This was a third-order spell called Raz Vua. Leonis had a Shadow Demon tail Tessera. These moderately powerful demons were traditionally set in the center of underground labyrinths. Hopefully, it would keep Tessera and the other children safe from any suspicious people who might do something to them.

…Am I being overprotective? Leonis wondered as he got to his feet.

◆

Now alone, Leonis set out to find a gift to present to his minion. Unfortunately, he had absolutely atrocious taste when it came to this sort of thing.

As a show of appreciation, he'd once given Shary the highest class of assassination dagger, the Death Butterfly's Dagger, Refisca. To his surprise, the maid only got angry at him about the present. "You just don't get it at all, Master!" she'd complained. Even so, the dagger did have a powerful curse on it, and Shary still used it often.

Leonis wandered around, stopping before a stall run by an old man smoking a pipe. The shop was selling silver ornaments.

"Can you show me your wares?" Leonis asked.

"Mm?" The old man opened one eye.

He initially seemed disappointed to see a child but, noticing Leonis's Excalibur Academy uniform, quickly changed his mind.

"Oh, hello. Are you looking for something?"

Leonis bent down, examining the items lined up on the carpet. He saw rings, earrings, bracelets, and other trinkets girls liked to wear.

They're made of silver… No mithril, though.

Leonis activated his mystic eyes of appraisal, whereupon a few rings lit up in his field of vision. These weren't true mystic eyes, of course, but an artificial effect afforded to his normal eyes via sorcery. Leonis picked up one bracelet that gleamed under his enhanced vision.

"What can you tell me about this item?"

"You've got quite the discerning eye for such a young man. That one was made by the elves in the special ward."

"Oh, is that right…? Wait, did you just say 'elves'?" Leonis asked in return. "There are elves in this city?"

"You've never seen an elf before?" The old man looked at him with a dubious expression.

"Ah, no, I'm a refugee who only recently came to this city…" Leonis uttered a vague lie.

"A refugee… I see."

…So it's not just the spirits. The elves are still alive, too, Leonis thought.

The elves were a race of highly intelligent humanoids with vast magical aptitude, making them capable of powerful sorcery. The elves of the Spirit Forest had worshipped the Holy Tree and opposed Leonis's undead legions, but the dark elves of the Everdark Forest had, at one time, been allies.

"Well, you'll find plenty of demis living in the sixth ward, the special demi-human protection ward," the old man said.

Leonis inquired further about the history of demi-humans. Apparently, sixty-four years ago, the demi-humans were driven to near extinction due to the Void invasion. In addition to elves, demi-humans included werewolves, lionmen, other beastmen races and dvergrs.

Demi-humans couldn't manifest Holy Swords to combat the Voids, so many of their kind had little choice but to join the Human Integration Project and migrate to the Assault Gardens.

"That brought no small amount of friction between peoples, though. I've heard there are terrorist attacks by radical cells in the capital…"

So it's no different from how things were a thousand years ago. Leonis felt chagrined.

Even with a common enemy bearing down on them, the people of this world still engaged in infighting. When Leonis had fought against the human kingdom, he'd made deliberate use of this lack of cooperation to divide and conquer.

Leonis decided on a small, silverwork cat accessory, tipping a little extra as thanks for all the information. Riselia wasn't the type to dress up often, but there were many sundries in her room with cat designs on them. Something like this was likely preferable to a bracelet in that regard.

While the object itself wasn't enchanted in any way, Leonis could place some death sorcery on it if he truly needed to. Making it a mythology-class or legend-class item probably wasn't possible, but he could at least turn it into a hero-class protective amulet.

Still, it's surprising to think the elves have survived after all this time…

As long-lived as the elven people were, Leonis doubted any still alive remembered his native era. It was nevertheless worth a try to ask and see what they did know, however.

I should look for the Everdark Forest.

Most of the demi-humans had apparently been integrated into the human empire, but Leonis couldn't imagine the proud, haughty dark elf tribe submitting to mankind. If his hunch was right, they would make an excellent asset to his own forces.

Negotiating with them will be difficult in this form. Perhaps I should let Blackas handle it…

As he considered that option, Leonis looked around for Tessera, when…

Isn't that…?

The figure of a familiar girl standing among the throngs of people caught Leonis's eye. It was a blond, pigtailed girl clad in the academy's uniform—Regina. She was flanked on either side by a boy, each of whom was also in an academy uniform. The two young men seemed to be arguing over something.

What is she doing here? Leonis wondered. Using his small, boyish physique to quickly slip through the crowd, he approached the little group.

"Let go of me, please," Regina insisted with visible annoyance.

"C'mon, you don't want to be all alone, right? Let's hang out," one of the boys said, reaching for her shoulder.

"No!" Regina brushed off his hand with a swing of her arm.

Hmph, they're trying to hit on her, Leonis inferred.

Objectively speaking, Regina Mercedes was a near-unrivaled beauty. Riselia was just as pretty but gave off a certain icy feel, one that was, in fact, quite removed from her actual personality. In contrast, Regina appeared much more easygoing, defenseless, and friendly toward everyone. A girl like her walking around this crowded place all on her own was bound to attract unwanted attention.

It really has nothing to do with me… Leonis made to turn around but then froze in place. He did owe Regina for helping him at the library that morning. Not repaying a debt would mar Leonis's dignity as a Dark Lord.

"Hey, misters, what are you doing?" Leonis asked with the voice of an innocent boy as he approached the three of them.

"…Is that you, kid?!" Regina's jasper eyes widened in shock.

"Huh? He's wearing the academy's uniform…?" one of the boys observed skeptically.

"Oh, I've heard of him. That's the brat the incompetent little princess picked up," the other said mockingly.

The "incompetent little princess" likely meant Riselia. It apparently wasn't well-known that she'd awakened to the power of her Holy Sword yet.

It takes quite a bit of gall to stand before a Dark Lord and insult his favored minion…

"Listen, kiddo, how about pissing off for a while? We're gonna play with this girl here."

"What?! That's not true! Stop making stuff up!" Regina spat angrily.

"I'm sorry, but I'm her escort…," Leonis said, looking up at the two older boys. "My apologies, misters, but *could you disappear*?"

"…What did you just say to us, you brat?!" The boys' faces filled with anger.

The next moment, however, their expressions stiffened as if freezing over.

"…Ah, aaaah, aaaaaahh…! Aaah…!"

"Wh-what the…? What the hell is this kid…?!"

The two started shivering and quaking as large, wet stains began spreading across their pants.

"…What's wrong?" Leonis asked in a whisper.

"E-eek!"

"M-m-monster…!"

The boys took off screaming, fleeing the plaza as fast as their legs could carry them.

Hmm. I was only trying to frighten them a bit.

Leonis had let the tiniest fraction of his Aura of Death slip out. This energy the Undead King cloaked himself in was capable of inflicting a number of assorted maladies, depending on the severity of exposure. Effects included panic, confusion, paralysis, petrification, and even instant death.

Having been exposed to just a portion of that aura had caused the troublesome boys to lapse into a state of momentary panic.

Be grateful that I am a magnanimous Dark Lord, Leonis thought as he watched the two who'd been giving Regina a hard time flee for their lives.

Any other Dark Lord would have quite literally wiped them off the face of the world. Then again, perhaps the biggest reason Leonis hadn't obliterated them was because it felt like it would've been a waste of energy.

"Um, what just happened?" a perplexed Regina asked.

“Who knows?” Leonis played dumb, though Regina seemed unconvinced.

“Anyway, what’re you doing here, kid?” she inquired.

“Well, you see…” Leonis recounted the particulars of how he’d wound up at the parade.

“Hmm, so you took a girl from the orphanage here. You smooth operator, you.” Regina poked his cheek.

“Don’t tease me,” Leonis said, exasperated.

“Lady Selia’s worried about you, you know,” Regina added.

“…I imagine she is,” Leonis replied, shrugging his shoulders. “And what are you doing here, Miss Regina?” It struck Leonis as odd that she would come alone.

“…Aaaaah, w-well, you see…,” Regina started, looking in a random direction. “Hey, kid, how about I buy you some candy? Or maybe you want to rub my chest?”

…She just dodged the question! Blatantly!

Following that exchange, Regina bought Leonis some ice cream from one of the stalls. It was the stretchy sort that Shary had mentioned in a previous report. He’d entrusted the maid with investigating the city, but half her report had ended up being about food.

With Shary on his mind, Leonis decided to buy her a long and narrow type of doughnut called a churro. She had served him faithfully for the last thousand years, so he thought she deserved some kind of reward. He placed a fixation spell on the sweet so it wouldn’t go cold and threw it into his shadow for safekeeping.

“Is there anything else you wanna eat, kid?” Regina asked.

“No, actually it’s almost time I meet up with Tessera and the others…”

That’s when it happened.

All at once, the sound of orchestral trumpets filled the air. Regina looked up toward the deck of the *Hyperion*. A girl had stepped out, accompanied by royal guards. She wore a brilliant white dress that shimmered in the sunlight. Her golden hair was done up behind her head. While this girl could only have been a year or two older than Leonis, it was clear, even at a distance, she was a real beauty.

“…Oh, c’mon!”

A crowd had gathered in the plaza, and Regina, who was relatively short, had to jump up and down to get a good view of the deck. Her pigtails and large breasts bounced along with her, forcing Leonis to look away awkwardly.

“So that girl’s the fourth princess of the empire?” Leonis inquired.

“Yeah, that’s Princess Altiria Ray O’ltriese. She’s a leading reformist among the members of the royal family. Despite being only twelve years old, she’s very dependable and hardworking.” Regina’s description almost sounded like bragging. Curiously, her fists were clenched.

“You seem very well informed on the subject,” Leonis observed.

“N-no, I’m not,” Regina said, turning red for some reason. “That’s, uh, common knowledge. Yeah, everyone knows that stuff…”

She then turned her gaze back toward the *Hyperion*’s deck. As the princess waved toward the masses, Regina returned the gesture.

“Sh-she’s so cute…,” Regina muttered with a sigh.

“She certainly is,” Leonis agreed.

Though if anyone’s cute here, it’s you, Leonis thought, though he decided it best to keep such a thought to himself. The way Regina looked at that twelve-year-old princess almost felt like…

Altiria pinched up the hems of her dress and bowed, much to the audible delight of the crowd.

“Good day, one and all,” the princess said.

No sooner had the words left the girl’s lips than…

“…?” Leonis immediately sensed something was off. The air grew tense, and the world seemed to creak. It was a disconcerting presence that felt entirely too familiar to the Dark Lord.

Crack, crack.

The sound of widening fractures running through reality rang out in a chorus all around them. Regina had clearly noticed it, too, and cast a hurried look at Leonis.

“Miss Regina…”

“I know!” she replied, a nervous edge in her voice.

Crack, craaaaaaaaaaack!

Countless tears erupted from seemingly nowhere. Distorted masses tore through the folds, emanating a foreboding miasma that filled the plaza.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A scream rang out.

◆

“What’s going on here?!” Princess Altiria cried from the *Hyperion*’s deck.

Innumerable fractures carved themselves into the air around them with a sound reminiscent of shattering glass. It was the same sort of phenomenon that had been seen throughout the city the day of the Stampede. This was the appearance of a Void colony.

Tentacles wreathed in foul fumes slithered from the cracks in space. Altiria knew, of course, this was an indicator of a Void outbreak, but this was the first time the twelve-year-old princess had seen the creatures in person.

“These are…Voids…!” she exclaimed.

“Your Highness, it’s dangerous. You must evacuate into the ship!” The royal guard’s Holy Swordsmen surrounded the princess to protect her.

Voids had only appeared in the city, but there was still the danger of the *Hyperion* being attacked.

“Understood.” The princess nodded and turned her eyes to the plaza.

Everyone who'd so eagerly gathered to greet her had fallen into a state of panic. Some were even frozen with terror.

"What about the underground shelters?" Altiria asked.

One of the royal guards began to explain, "The recent Stampede has left a few of them inoperable, but—"

"Then have them evacuate to the ship," Altiria insisted firmly, cutting him off.

Being an anti-Void battleship, there was no safer place than the *Hyperion* itself.

"Y-Your Highness…," another royal guard tried to protest.

"Please hurry!" Altiria implored her men.

"Understood, Your Highness. We'll open the hangars at once," the knight captain declared, immediately barking orders into his communication device. "This way, please, Your Highness. Over here…"

"All right," she agreed.

"The royal guard's knights are to escape while escorting Her Highness. First unit, escort the civilians. Third and fourth units, deploy and eradicate the monsters!"

Altiria started running, flanked by her royal guard.

Bang, bang, bang!

The sounds of bombardment shook the air. Flashes of light burst in the sky, blowing away the Voids that had so suddenly appeared.

…Who's that?

Altiria found herself looking back to see where the shots had come from. Standing atop one of the plaza's buildings was a blond girl, her pigtails flapping in the wind. She was picking off the Voids that had appeared on the surface. It was, in all likelihood, one of Excalibur Academy's Holy Swordsmen.

The sight of this brave girl left a lasting impression on Altiria.

◆

Screams rang out from every which way. People were running for their lives in a mad frenzy. With the Stampede having been mere days ago, the reaction was more than understandable.

There's twelve… No, thirteen small-sized Voids. And their numbers are growing… Leonis remained unfazed as he calmly analyzed the situation.

Tears in space were forming not only in the plaza but also around the ship. Voids sporting disgusting tentacles and garbed in gray vapors slinked from the gaps.

They look kind of like aquatic demons…

Voids retained some physical similarities to the creatures Leonis knew from his era. He wasn't as knowledgeable, but if he had to give these many-armed Voids a name, he'd call them kraken class…

"…Holy Sword, Activate—Drag Howl!" Quickly grasping the situation, Regina materialized her cannon-type Holy Sword on her shoulder. "I'll blow you to bits!"

Bang! Bang!

She fired at once, unleashing burning fireballs that reduced two Voids to dust.

"These things are sea devil class!" Regina called out to Leonis, wiping the sweat off her forehead. "They've been seen in the northern ocean, near Yonheim, the Fifth Assault Garden! Listen, kid, I'll handle this place. You go help the civilians evacuate."

Regina stood with her back turned to Leonis, glaring at the empty holes that continued spitting out more Voids as she spoke. Unaware of Leonis's hidden power, Regina's plan was likely to take the full brunt of the invading force on her own to provide Leonis with a chance to escape.

Leonis's sorcery could likely reduce all the Voids to ashes in the blink of an eye, but he couldn't allow such a large crowd of people to bear witness to his powers. More than anything else, though, he was worried about Tessera and the other two. The children of Phrenia's orphanage were subjects under his protection, second only to his minion.

"Understood. Be careful, Miss Regina!"

"You too, kid," Regina replied with a cheerful tone, perhaps hoping it would reassure Leonis.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The air quivered as cannon blasts sounded again and again. Leonis summoned the Staff of Sealed Sins from his shadow.

A mana barrier and accuracy augmentation. That much should be sufficient.

Leonis cast as many supportive spells as he could on Regina without her noticing and ran into the plaza. He conjured a gravitational field spell as he sprinted along, and he soon happened upon Tessera, Millet, and Linze.

The kids were all still safe, and Leonis had to praise their quick thinking. Though they'd run off in a panic like the rest of the crowd, the kids had stuck together and hidden in the shadow of a building.

"Are you all right?" Leonis asked as he approached them.

"Leo…" A frightened Tessera raised her face and gave a firm nod.

Millet and Linze shivered as they sat huddled together.

"Try to stay calm. Take the two of them and get away from here."

"A-all right!" Tessera nodded again, clenching her fists tightly.

The Shadow Demon Leonis had left to guard Tessera would keep her safe. Unfortunately, he heard the sound of something cracking behind him. It was another fracture in space.

"Farga!" Leonis wheeled around and unleashed an explosive spell that blew the Void to bits.

Millet and Linze shrank away in fear at the sound of the blast.

“This way!” Tessera took the hands of the younger children and pulled them to their feet.

Creak, crrraaack…

What’s this now? Leonis wondered.

A massive fissure ran across the clear, blue sky.

◆

Crack, crrreeeaak, craaash…!

Wrenching the large tear open from the inside, something began to emerge. It was a massive, chambered nautilus-like creature with giant pincerlike arms and countless writhing tentacles. Its length ran about half that of the destroyers moored in the harbor.

“…Is that a kraken? No, a giant crab?” Leonis pondered aloud.

He’d never seen such a creature before, but the demonic oceans had always been the domain of Rivaiz Deep Sea. Leonis’s knowledge of underwater monsters was limited at best.

A monster of that sort may well have existed in the past…

The gigantic Void expelled a miasma as it sloshed ahead, swinging its great pincers down on the buildings in its way.

Booooooooooom!

A thundering rumble sounded as the structures crumbled into large clouds of dust and debris, forming mountains of wreckage.

Bang! Bang, bang!

From within one cloud of grit, Regina unleashed powerful blasts into the enemy. Unfortunately, while her firepower was capable of wiping out ogre-class Voids with ease, her shots were promptly repelled by this Void’s sturdy shell.

A third-order spell can’t hope to burn something of this caliber, Leonis concluded calmly.

In his current body, Leonis’s mana was a far cry from what it’d been in his heyday. Of course, if he used a spell of the ninth order or above—sorcery considered to be on a tactical level—he could easily blow the Void apart, shell and all. The trouble was that it would expose him as a Dark Lord right in front of the imperial army.

To say nothing of drawing my Demon Sword, Leonis mused, gripping the Staff of Sealed Sins tightly.

Currently, Leonis couldn’t completely control his Demon Sword, Dáinsleif. Failure to rein in its power could mean the destruction of the entire port.

“Second unit, surround the large target!”

“Other units, prioritize evacuation of civilians!”

A contingent of Holy Swordsmen took the field and surrounded the massive Void. These were the knights of the empire, and their movements were organized and practiced. Even with their numbers, however, downing such a towering and mighty Void was sure to be no easy task.

Leonis turned his eyes to the harbor. Many people were hurrying up a ramp to the *Hyperion*. The knights handily defeated the sea devil–class Voids, but if the large Void was to turn its attention toward the escaping civilians, there would undoubtedly be countless casualties.

The blade of the Demon Sword vibrated slightly, sealed as it was within Leonis's staff. Upon defeating Arakael of the Six Heroes, Leonis had declared the Seventh Assault Garden to be a part of his kingdom, much as the Realm of Shadows was. A Dark Lord couldn't stand by and let his subjects die. Dáinsleif, a Demon Sword granted by the Goddess of Rebellion, wouldn't tolerate it, either.

"Miss Regina," Leonis started.

"…Huh? Kid?"

Leonis used a telepathy spell to transmit his voice to Regina's communication device. While jamming caused by the Void muffled the sound, it still came through.

"I'll restrain it. Fire at its unarmored sections with everything you have."

"How are you going to stop it, exactly?"

"Just leave it to me."

There was a brief moment where Regina said nothing.

"—Roger that. Maximum firepower, right?" she eventually replied.

Leonis leaped into the air with levitation magic and landed on the roof of a weapons factory. Activating his mystic eyes, he used a spell called Weakness Discernment to identify structural flaws in the building located directly next to the colossal Void.

"One, two, three… Hmm, knocking out a total of eight spots should do it."

Leonis produced eight balls of light from the tip of his staff. These spheres were a rearranged version of the second-order spell Farga. He swung the staff down, firing each of the globes at load-bearing points in the building.

"Break!"

The exploding spells all activated at once.

Ka-booooom!

Leonis's magic did the trick, sending the giant building plummeting toward the large Void.

A physical attack that makes use of an extremely large mass. Even its sturdy shell can't withstand a force that intense, Leonis reasoned.

At the sight of the collapsing structure, the nearby Holy Swordsmen all quickly made their escape.

They're not my subjects, so it hardly matters what happens to them.

As planned, the titanic Void was crushed under the building, writhing beneath the weight of the wreckage.

"Eat this! Drag Blast!"

With a rumbling sound, Regina loosed the most powerful shot she could muster!

Unfortunately…

"*Grrraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!*" the Void bellowed, and a shimmering light gathered in its tentacled mouth cavity.

What?!

A burning bolt lanced from the beast's maw, swallowing up Regina's blast and boring a hole right through the center of the building on which she was standing.

"Miss Regina!"

Immediately, the structure began to falter, its center fusing and melting from the heat of the shot that had so thoroughly run it through. Having lost her footing, Regina tumbled from a fifty-meter height.

Can I make it?!

Leonis aimed his staff at Regina and hurriedly started chanting a gravity control spell. At that moment, a small vehicle plunged into the shower of rubble and dust.

What's that? Leonis thought.

Silver hair danced in the wind. The girl riding the vehicle kicked off against it and jumped up. The machine was left behind to accelerate on its own, blowing sparks into the air in its wake. As she climbed into the air, the silver-haired girl caught hold of Regina in her arms.

Abandoned, the vehicle crashed into the rubble, bursting with a loud explosion. Landing back on the ground with Regina in her arms was none other than Riselia, Leonis's minion. Slowly, she let Regina down.

"Phew, that was dangerous…"

"Aaaah, L-Lady Selia, what are you doing here?!"

Leonis heard the conversation through Regina's communication device.

"Erm… Leo said he was here, so…"

It was only then that Leonis recalled he had sent a message detailing as much to Riselia.

"…Whoa. You're pretty overprotective."

"I-I'm not… W-wait, that doesn't matter right now!" **Riselia cried.**

Leonis turned to look at the giant Void.

"Raaaaaaaaaaa….!"

Already the creature was pushing itself free from the building that had landed on top of it.

To think a mere chambered nautilus could have such power… Leonis clicked his tongue.

The bolt of light the giant monster had released hadn't been a spell. It was a power unique to its kind, not unlike a dragon's breath attack.

"Lady Selia, I'm gonna fire another full-power shot. Buy me the time to charge it, okay?"

"All right. Activate—Bloody Sword!"

Particles of light gathered in Riselia's hand, manifesting a Holy Sword that shone with a silver glow.

◆

Kraka-booooooooooooom!

The monstrous Void's giant pincer arms swung down on the ground, splitting the earth in two and sending up a fountain of dust and debris.

Riselia evaded the destructive blow with dance-like steps, however.

"Hyaaah!"

Her sword became a silvery flash as it was thrust into one of the arm's joints with deadly accuracy. This was the skillful swordplay of a knight, as deadly as it was elegant. The Holy Swordsmen fighting around Riselia eyed her with surprise.

Not finished, Riselia then rapidly kicked off the ground, launching another high-speed slash at the same point she'd stabbed just a moment before. A polluted miasma sprayed into the air like blood splatter.

I suppose nothing can compare with the experience a real battlefield provides. Leonis found himself mentally applauding his minion. He was proud.

Riselia's movements were a world apart from when she'd fought his skeletons. The same could be said for when she'd caught Regina earlier. She'd mastered the act of tempering the mana in her body and then unleashing it in explosive bursts.

A frail human body wouldn't have been able to withstand the strain of such incredible feats, but Riselia Ray Crystalia was a vampire of the highest order, a Vampire Queen.

A sharp, blinding slash cut through the gray vapors billowing from the Void. The empire's Holy Swordsmen had joined Riselia in the fight, unleashing a furious flurry of blows. Despite their finest efforts, however, they lacked the power needed for a decisive finishing strike that would break through the Void's mighty defenses.

That proved to not be an issue for long, though.

"Lady Selia, I'm ready! Preparing to fire!" Regina's voice rang out.

"Everyone, get down!" Riselia exclaimed.

Hearing this, the nearby Holy Swordsmen immediately cleared the area. At the same time, a burning flash of light, the same shining, destructive force that had overtaken Regina's attack before, began forming inside the Void's mouth.

Simultaneously, a dagger of darkness zoomed through the air. The blade, which had been launched from a great distance, cut through the Void's tentacles and bored into its maw. The sudden shock must have thrown the creature off balance, because its heat blast misfired, creating a large explosion.

"…"

Leonis, who had been looking down, turned and saw the shadow of a small girl standing atop a building in the distance. She bowed swiftly and melted into the shadows. With the Void's attack thwarted…

"I'll blow you awaaaaaaaaaaaay! Drag Blast!"

Regina fired her powerful shot. A round of seething plasma burned through the sea devil–class Voids that stood in its way and impacted with the larger Void head-on.

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

A surge of air signaled a brilliant burst that momentarily blinded all who beheld it.

So this is the power of a Holy Sword pushed to its limits.

Such force rivaled one of Leonis's fifth-order spells, the Demonic Thunder Shell, Buras Zamd, in sheer firepower. The Void was annihilated, leaving only its steaming carapace behind.

"Yeaaaaaaaaaaaah! We did it!" the Holy Swordsmen cheered.

Regina fell to her knees. Evidently, she'd exhausted her strength. Her Holy Sword, Drag Howl, dissipated into flecks of light.

All that remained now was to take care of the lingering smaller Voids. The Holy Swordsmen who'd helped citizens get to safety had returned and were ready to join the fight, too.

"…Hmm."

As the sound of battle cries and clashing weapons rang out around him, Leonis turned his attention to the sea. Using his mystic eyes, he gazed into the water.

I knew it. It's still alive.

Seizing the moment when everyone had been blinded and deafened by the explosion, the creature had discarded its shell and escaped underwater with a speed one would never have imagined possible for its massive form. Leonis was likely the only one to have noticed. What's more, it seemed to have begun healing itself underwater.

"I should finish it off," Leonis whispered with a shrug. "It can't hope to escape a Dark Lord's wrath."

Leonis formed a gravity sphere around himself and melted into the shadow beneath him. Crossing through a shadow corridor, he appeared near the Void swimming through the water. Leonis floated up, manipulating the gravity of the water around him. Curiously, the Void drew back slightly at the sight.

"Oh? I thought you were a monster bereft of intelligence, but it seems you're capable of fear," Leonis said, looking down from within his gravity sphere at the mass of writhing tentacles.

He had no personal grudge against this monster, of course, and yet…

"You dared to threaten my kingdom, and you must be punished for that," Leonis announced as the jewel sitting at the tip of his Staff of Sealed Sins gave off an ominous blue glow. "This is my thanks for serving as a practice partner for my minion. I shall grant you a painless death."

Leonis casted a tactical-class, eighth-order spell known as Earth Tremor Impact. Countless jagged spires of rock rose up from the ocean floor, mercilessly piercing the massive Void's body. The stone slashed and crushed until not a trace of the monster remained.

◆

Those evacuated had crowded into the *Hyperion*'s hangar. The people huddled together in fear as the sounds of battle and destruction echoed from outside the walls.

A fear of Voids had already become instinctive for humans. Those frightful creatures were apex predators, and humans were their preferred prey. Among the masses who teetered on the brink of panic, however, there were individuals biding their time, waiting for the right chance to present itself.

"Did that woman really summon Voids?"

"Can't be. That's…impossible…"

"Huh, was it just a coincidence?"

"…It… It might be the goddess's prophecy…"

"The prophecy, huh? That sounds even less likely."

"Be quiet, you idiots…"

A giant beastman spoke in a hushed growl from beneath a hood hanging low over his face. It was Bastea Colossuf, leader of the Sovereign Wolves. He and his men had taken advantage of the confusion and snuck on board the *Hyperion*.

It's almost anticlimactic when things go this smoothly…

The imperial army had a duty to protect civilians during a Void attack, so joining the fleeing masses to infiltrate the ship had been exceedingly easy. Still, Bastea couldn't help but wonder whether Sharnak really had summoned the Voids or had merely predicted they would be there.

The timing had been just a little too convenient. If this really had all been Sharnak's doing…

Hmph, damn witch…, Bastea silently cursed.

Joined by two others, Bastea left the room and walked down a corridor. The next block on the ship was one the civilians weren't allowed to enter.

"Hey, you there. What are you doing here?" A sentry stopped the group to interrogate them.

He clutched a rifle in his hand, a kind of artificial Holy Sword developed in the Assault Garden.

"Hmm? Wait, you're beastmen? Take off your hoods and show me your faces," the guard demanded.

"Sure thing…"

The next moment, the beastman's claws flashed like blades. Blood splashed into the air, and the guard screamed as he fell to the floor, dying.

"Heh-heh. That's not a bad look."

Gerðr Honzak the werewolf pressed a knife to the downed man's neck. The weapon was called Face Thief, a Demon Sword granted to him by Sharnak.

"I'll be honest, I'd have preferred a Holy Swordsman's face," Gerðr admitted.

“You can get one of those later. Activate,” Bastea said as he began chanting.

A sword clad in flames appeared in the beastman’s hand. He swung the blade, spraying crimson fire that consumed the corpse and any blood left behind. Gerðr, who had taken the sentry’s face, was able to use the facial recognition system to open a nearby partition gate.

“All righty, what now?” the werewolf asked flippantly.

“We…open a shadow gate with…sorcery…and call our comrades… here…,” their third member, an old elf, answered.

“Sorcery, eh? I hear you elves use some weird curses…,” Gerðr remarked, eyeing the oldest member of the trio suspiciously.

While the secrets of sorcery had been forgotten by most, they were still known to the elves.

“Hurry up. We need to finish this before the Holy Swordsmen finish off the Voids,” Bastea insisted as they advanced down the corridor.

CHAPTER 3
HYPERION

“W-wow, look at this! This place is bigger than our house!”

“I-I’d bet the armory is beneath this block! It’s gotta be!”

Millet and Linze cheered as they ran down the carpeted corridor.

“Calm down, you two. You’re being rude,” Tessera chided the siblings.

“We can have a look later, all right?” Riselia turned to face the children with a wry smile.

They were on the third level of the cutting-edge anti-Void battleship, *Hyperion*. Civilians weren’t allowed to enter this area under any circumstances, yet Leonis and his group were strolling through unimpeded.

The fourth princess of the empire, Altiria O’ltriese, had invited them onto the ship to thank them personally for their assistance in securing the civilians’ safety.

“Her Highness also mentioned that she would love for you to participate in tonight’s social mixer,” said the royal guard captain walking ahead of them.

“A social mixer?” Leonis asked.

“It’s a small party held by Her Highness,” Riselia explained. “It’s so she may gather the influential people of the Seventh Assault Garden and hold an exchange of ideas and opinions. Princess Altiria always seeks out the many different opinions of people in varied positions.”

“Indeed. We’ll be holding a little party before the brainstorming meeting, and Her Highness would be glad to have you attend,” the guard captain added.

Hmm. As far as Leonis was concerned, this was a fantastic opportunity to gather information about the current goings-on of the empire without rousing any suspicion.

“E-erm, can we come, too?!” Tessera asked nervously.

“Of course. You’re companions of these fine people.”

“That said, we don’t have any formal clothes for social events. Is that all right?” Leonis asked.

He had the Cloak of Darkness he used to wear during the Gatherings of the Eight Dark Lords, but not only was it too big for him now, it also gave off a menacing aura.

“Your academy uniforms will do. Her Highness isn’t one for stiff evening parties.”

“That’s good…”

The group continued down a hall of the ship.

“Erm, Miss Selia…,” Leonis said, pinching Riselia’s sleeve as she walked ahead of him.

“Mm?”

“Why did Miss Regina run off?” he whispered.

It was true that Regina was conspicuously absent. She’d been invited as well, of course, but had disappeared just before they’d boarded the *Hyperion*. She’d been so enthusiastic about the princess that Leonis found it hard to imagine the girl passing up a chance like this.

“Regina, well… Regina has her own circumstances…,” Riselia said evasively with a somewhat bothered expression.

“Circumstances…?”

“Yes. It’s not really something I can talk about. It’s a personal problem of hers…”

“…I see.”

When Riselia put it like that, Leonis had no choice but to step away from the topic. Leonis himself had hidden quite the large secret from Riselia, too, after all.

“There’s something else we need to talk about, Leo,” Riselia interjected before clearing her throat.

“Wh-what?”

“If you’re going outside the academy, you have to tell me first,” Riselia scolded, poking Leonis’s forehead as they walked.

“Erm, I did leave a message on your terminal…,” he explained.

“…Th-that’s not enough. I was worried about you.” Riselia pouted, puffing her cheeks in discontentment.

Seeing a girl of such cool, collected beauty make a face like that was oddly adorable.

“I—I am your guardian, after all,” she added.

“…Understood. I’m sorry.”

Clearly Riselia had been rather worried about Leonis. Her tone was kind, but her eyes were quite serious. When Leonis was the Undead King, he and Blackas had infiltrated the human kingdom without informing anyone beforehand. Roselia, who’d hardly ever shown anger toward anything, had grown cross with them for not informing her and brought down divine punishment on the two. This situation reminded Leonis of that nostalgic memory.

“Oh, right. I want to give you this…,” Leonis said, taking out the silver accessory he’d bought in the plaza.

It was a cat-shaped charm, now enchanted with a bit of Leonis’s mana.

“Huh? Erm…” Riselia looked confused.

“I bought it at the parade. It’s a souvenir…for you,” Leonis explained, holding the charm out to her.

“Y-you bought this for me?”

“Yes, you’ve helped me out a great deal. You even saved my life.”

"…!" Riselia covered her mouth with her hands as joyful tears formed in her eyes.

…I-isn't this a bit excessive? Leonis wondered, somewhat startled.

"Thank you, Leo!" Riselia grinned, her mood rebounding instantly. "This makes me really happy, but if you keep treating girls like this, you'll end up being a dark lord in the bedroom. So you can't do this with anyone else."

A Dark Lord?! For a moment Leonis thought Riselia might have discovered his secret identity, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

"Tessera, what do dark lords do in the bedroom?" Millet cocked her head curiously.

"I, erm… I don't know…," Tessera replied, her face turning red.

◆

"We've brought the ones you asked for, Princess Altiria."

The doors to the audience chamber opened, and Leonis and his group entered, led by the royal guard's knights.

"Woooow…," Tessera couldn't help but exclaim before clasping her hands over her mouth bashfully.

The room was lit by enchanted lights along the wall, and a crimson carpet was spread beneath their feet. It was an extravagant, luxurious design one wouldn't have expected to find on a battleship. The room appeared as though it'd been cut from a palace and inserted into the ship instead.

At the end of the creaseless red carpet was an antique-looking throne, upon which sat a girl in a white dress.

So this is the empire's fourth princess. Leonis's eyes widened slightly.

Her appearance suggested she was twelve or perhaps thirteen, only a few years older than Leonis's current body. Hair a bright shade of blond had been tied up in a bun. In her eyes was the kind of innocence one might've expected from a girl her age, but there was the light of definite intellect and wisdom in her jade eyes. Her skin was as white as snow, and her dainty, young legs dangled off the edge of the magnificent throne.

Truly, this was a girl whose beauty was reminiscent of the sun. What drew Leonis's attention far more than the princess's fair appearance was the thing resting on her lap.

Is that…?

It was a small, white creature with fluffy fur and long ears. A red, shining gemstone was embedded in its forehead. At first, Leonis thought it was merely some magic forest creature, but he soon realized he was wrong. He let mana flow into his eyes and looked at it again; it was clear the creature was a spirit.

Unlike the one Leonis had encountered in the library, this wasn't artificial. It was a true Origin Spirit, the kind that had existed a thousand years ago. The small furball-like creature slept curled in the princess's arms.

Riselia stepped forward ahead of the others and knelt down. Tessera, Millet, and Linze all followed her example.

“L-Leo…!”

Leonis had remained standing, prompting Riselia to whisper at him hurriedly. Restraining an annoyed sigh, Leonis pondered for a moment.

Why should a Dark Lord bend a knee to the royal who will eventually be his vassal? This was a matter of pride, but Riselia kept tugging at the hem of his shirt, urging him to relinquish.

If it’s to allow my minion to avoid embarrassment, I suppose there’s no harm. Leonis bowed his head elegantly to the princess.

“Please raise your heads, everyone. We are not in the palace…” The princess looked slightly flustered as she rose from her throne and approached.

“I am Altiria Ray O’ltriese, fourth princess of the Integrated Empire.” The princess lifted the hems of her skirt and curtsied respectfully. “I am grateful for your gallant endeavors, brave Holy Swordsmen.”

“Not at all, Your Highness. We only did our duty as members of Excalibur Academy,” Riselia answered, raising her face to meet Altiria’s gaze.

“I also extend my gratitude to you all on behalf of the imperial knights,” the royal guard captain added, bowing his head at Riselia as well.

“Miss Riselia, are you not Duke Crystalia’s…?” the princess inquired.

“Yes. My father’s will lives on in me, and I have recently been granted the power of a Holy Sword.”

“I am honored to finally meet you. E-erm…” Curiously, the princess looked as if she wanted to say something more, but she quickly swallowed her words and turned her gaze to Leonis.

“You’re a Holy Swordsman, too, I see. Being a Holy Swordsman at the age of ten is astounding. I have yet to be graced with my own Holy Sword, so I must say I greatly respect you.”

“Your kind words are wasted on me…,” he replied modestly, his head bowed.

I shall sit upon your throne when the Dark Lords’ Armies rise again. Leonis cackled wickedly within his mind.

Princess Altiria then addressed Tessera, Millet, and Linze in turn, asking them if they’d been scared or hurt. Tessera was overtaken by timidity and stammered in an adorable, flustered manner.

“Hee-hee. You needn’t be nervous.” Altiria placed a hand over Tessera’s mouth and smiled gently. “I hope you will all enjoy your time today.”

The gesture struck Leonis as incredibly familiar. It reminded him of someone he knew.

◆

“Achoo!”

The sun had set, and the air was turning cold. Regina watched as heavy machinery cleared away the rubble from the battle. She sat on a bench in the ruined plaza with her chin resting in her hands, looking up at the *Hyperion*'s illuminated deck. She sighed, twirling the tip of one of her pigtails with a finger.

I probably could've seen her…

A regret weighed heavily on the young woman's heart. Meeting the princess had been out of the question, so she'd been forced to run when her friends had been invited on board the ship. Actually, it was more like Regina wasn't sure what to do if she met the princess. Altiria didn't know a thing about her, after all, and Regina Mercedes was forbidden from ever revealing her true name.

All right, time to go home. It's getting cold. Regina hopped to her feet. She planned on returning to the Hræsvelgr dorm and cooking up some vegetable pasta. Perhaps she'd watch one of the mystery films she'd borrowed from the library that morning.

"Regina? What are you doing here?" a voice suddenly asked her.

"Aaah!" Regina exclaimed in an awkwardly high pitch.

Turning around, she found herself face-to-face with a pretty, older girl with sleek, waist-length black hair. It was Elfiné Phillet, another member of the eighteenth platoon.

"M-Miss Elfiné, why are you here?"

"I was invited to Her Highness's mixer. I was passing by on my vehicle and saw you here."

"Oh," Regina said, nodding in understanding.

Elfiné was related to a count whose house had connections with the royal family. They were also the owners of the large corporation that handled the production of Artificial Elementals: the Phillet Company. Elfiné was her house's sole daughter and heiress. Even without such titles, though, she was Excalibur Academy's foremost expert on magical apparatuses. It was only natural she'd been invited to the gathering.

"And what are you doing here, Regina?"

"Oh, erm, I just thought that it's not often you get to see the newest battleship, so I figured I might as well take a—" Regina waved her hands in a flustered gesture, trying to dodge the question.

"You don't want to see your little sister?" Elfiné inquired.

"…" Regina bit her lip and fell silent.

There was no lying or talking her way out when it came to Elfiné. The older girl merely smiled and grabbed Regina's hand gently.

"We should go together," she insisted.

"H-huuuh?! B-but I wasn't invited…"

"I'll handle that," Elfiné said, pulling out a terminal and tapping at it with her fingertips. "There, done."

"What did you do?"

"I duplicated my invitation and sent it to your terminal."

“Are you really allowed to do that…?! Wait, no, how is that even possible?”

“Just keep it a secret from the bureau. ♪ ” Elfiné put a finger to her lips and winked whimsically.

“…You’re a bad person, Miss Elfiné.”

“Heh-heh, I sure am. A real villainess.” Elfiné cocked her hips in her best approximation of an evil pose.

Regina could only sigh in resignation.

“Of course, whether you come with me or not is up to you.” Elfiné’s tone suddenly turned serious, and she looked Regina straight in the eye.

“…”

“But keep in mind that, if you let this chance pass you by, you might never get another opportunity to meet the princess ever again. I want you to be sure you won’t regret this.” Elfiné tapped Regina on the shoulder and made her exit.

Standing in the rubble-strewn plaza, Regina was planted in place, her terminal gripped tightly in her hands.

◆

Having been led into a guest room, Leonis took a seat on the bed. While the quarters weren’t very large, the room’s dresser, table, and other fixtures were all a high enough quality to suit Leonis’s standards.

This ship model is especially lovely.

The thing he liked most about the room was a model of a sailboat sitting in a glass case on the shelf. It was a work of art down to its most minute details, and Leonis could sense the devotion the artist had put into making it.

Leonis liked building models. During the stifling, months-long waits that came with siege battles, he’d whiled away the time by using bird bones to build models of castles, dragons, or ships.

A pity the only ones I could show them off to were the skeletons who served me.

Lying on the bed, Leonis pulled a stack of parchment from within his shadow. It was the manuscript of one of the ancient books he’d copied in the library. There was still plenty of time before the mixer, and he decided to put it to use.

Sixty-four years ago, the mysterious life-forms called the Voids had launched their invasion, and 75 percent of mankind’s population was wiped out. Following that, the empire had spearheaded the Human Integration Project.

No materials in the library archives went back any further than that event. The destruction caused by the Voids was said to be the reason, but that seemed unlikely.

Someone is trying to intentionally conceal the world of the past.

That much was clear, but Leonis seemed to be the only one who'd noticed that purposeful obfuscation, because he knew some of what had come before the Void attacks. He knew of the Luminous Powers, the Six Heroes, Roselia Ishtaris, the Goddess of Rebellion, and the Eight Dark Lords who'd reigned over the continent along with their vast armies. Leonis could not have been more certain of their place in history, yet they'd all been erased from the collective records of humanity.

Furthermore, why was sorcery discarded for a civilization based on magical technology?

Leonis glanced down at the terminal in his hand. Even the dvergrs and elves couldn't have created such an advanced magical apparatus. Leonis chanted a language decipher spell and began reading the transcribed volume. The author of the tome was a human sorcerer from roughly two hundred years ago.

I suppose that'd make this a grimoire of sorts.

Reading carefully, Leonis pored over the manuscript but found no mention of any Dark Lords or gods. What he did happen upon, however, were descriptions of lesser spells with which he was quite familiar.

Wait, most of these are spells I developed…

The text detailed spells as high as the third order, often regarding them as though they were secret miracles. A mere human being able to cast third-order sorcery was impressive in and of itself, but it was still comparatively low.

This isn't of much use.

Concluding there was no point to reading through the whole thing, Leonis discarded the parchment, letting it sink back into his shadow. If nothing else, the text had proved that, indeed, sorcery was still being practiced two centuries ago.

Leonis lay on his back. Not much time had passed. Remembering something he'd forgotten to do earlier, he beckoned to the girl hiding in his shadow.

"Shary."

"Did you call for me, my master?" The dark beneath Leonis writhed, and a girl in maid's clothing rose up from it.

She had shoulder-length hair that was as black as night. Her eyes were the color of dusk and were offset by alabaster skin that looked to have never known the touch of the sun.

This girl was Leonis's dark minion, Shary Shadow Assassin. Once an assassin of the Realm of Shadows, Shary had sworn fealty to Leonis and became his personal maid. She knelt before Leonis and bowed her head respectfully.

"Did you throw that blade during the battle today?" Leonis inquired.

"Yes, as presumptuous of me as it may have been," Shary answered, ashamed.

“No, it’s fine. It was quite helpful.” Leonis shook his head. “But abstain from doing anything too conspicuous in the future.”

“Understood. I will act as such going forward.”

“Good.” Leonis nodded approvingly. “Incidentally, there is something I want you to handle.”

“Ask anything of me, Master.”

“I want you to scout out this battleship, the *Hyperion*. Its armaments, cruising abilities, scouting abilities, its passengers, its engine, and also… Yes, investigate its living spaces, as well. Then, report back to me.”

“By your will, my master.”

Her master’s intentions were clear to Shary. Rebuilding the Dark Lords’ Armies in this new age meant they would need a powerful navy as well.

A thousand years ago, the demonic oceans had been ruled by Rivaiz Deep Sea, Lord of the Seas. From what Leonis had heard, however, Rivaiz had engaged in battle with a powerful mage who was a member of the Six Heroes. Both had met watery graves during their struggle. Surely Rivaiz would have no objections to Leonis, the last surviving Dark Lord, taking command over his former dominion.

The *Hyperion* was undoubtedly on the cutting edge of mankind’s magical technology. This was a golden opportunity to steal the secrets of its construction and use them for Leonis’s own purposes. Shary, an assassin of the shadows, could collect all the information Leonis required while avoiding detection.

“And what about slaying any foes in the event of a fi—”

“Strictly forbidden. Don’t draw attention to yourself,” Leonis commanded.

“Understood. I will begin my investigation at once.” The assassin maid bowed once and began silently sinking back into Leonis’s shadow.

“Oh, wait just a moment,” Leonis called after half the girl’s body had already descended.

Shary eyed him questioningly.

“I have a present for you.”

“…?! Whaaaaaaaaaaat?!” Shary exclaimed in utter shock as she scrambled to pull herself back out of the shadow. “A p-present for me, Master?” Shary’s usually sagacious expression turned to a broad smile.

“Indeed,” Leonis replied.

“N-no, you cannot show such kindness to a mere assassin maid like me…”

“Don’t say that. You’re the only maid who’s remained by my side for all these years.”

“M-Master…,” Shary stammered, her face flushing red.

Leonis handed the girl a brown paper bag.

“Erm, what’s this…?” she asked.

“Mm, these are called churros. They’re long, thin doughnuts.”

“Oh…,” Shary replied dispiritedly.

“What? I thought you liked doughnuts,” Leonis stated.

When he’d first sent her on recon, Shary had mostly just bought a lot of sweets. In particular, the girl seemed to have quite the affinity for doughnuts. She’d even secreted some of them away into Leonis’s shadow.

“No, I do like them, but… You’re an idiot, Master,” Shary declared, glaring bitterly at Leonis.

“Well, anyway. Make sure to handle things for me, Shary.”

“…Fine.” With that rather unenthusiastic response being her last word, Shary disappeared into her master’s shadow.

“Now then, let’s check another manuscript…,” Leonis said.

In a bit of unfortunate timing, however, just as he reached into his shadow to retrieve another copied tome, he heard a gentle knock at the door.

“Leo, are you there?”

“Miss Selia?” Leonis knit his eyebrows and opened the door.

Standing outside his room were Riselia, Tessera, and the other kids.

“Is something wrong?” Leonis asked.

“We’re all planning on going swimming in the pool. Come with us, Leo,” Millet said.

“A pool?”

“There’s a swimming pool on the rooftop of the ship. We got permission to use it,” Riselia explained.

Apparently, it had been installed for the crew’s training and leisure. Tessera, standing behind Riselia and holding an inner tube in her hands, nodded enthusiastically.

“I think I’ll politely decline.” Leonis shook his head.

“What, why?!” Millet exclaimed.

“Pools are dangerous. One could drown,” Leonis answered flatly.

“Oh, can’t you swim, Leo?” Millet asked.

“Th-that’s not it.”

Riselia didn’t miss that momentary waver in Leonis’s eyes, though. Her lovely lips curled into a smile. “Don’t worry, Leo. I can teach you how,” she offered happily.

“…I, ugh, I mean, I don’t have a swimsuit, see?”

“I bought you one as thanks for the present you gave me,” Riselia replied, spreading out a pair of black swimming trunks.

Well, aren’t you awfully prepared! Leonis mentally quipped.

“…A—a girl of your age shouldn’t go around flaunting underwear in public!” Leonis exclaimed, snatching the garment from his minion’s clutches.

“Come on, let’s hurry up and go already,” Millet insisted. “Tessera wants to show you her swimsuit.”

“D-don’t say stuff like th-that!” Tessera stammered with rosy cheeks, raining harmless little punches on Millet’s head.

“I’m not forcing you to go, but I’d be really happy if you came along, Leo.” With that parting remark, Riselia quietly closed the door to Leonis’s room.

“Uggghhh…,” Leonis moaned, looking at the black swimming trunks in his hands.

◆

In the end, Leonis wound up joining the others at the pool.

I really am hopeless when it comes to my minions’ requests…

Leonis got into his bathing suit in a changing stall and was now gazing out at the sea from the edge of the pool. The sun had already started to sink below the horizon, casting red, refracting rays on the water. As he took in the sight, he heaved a deep sigh.

Leonis Death Magnus, the grand almighty Undead King, had but one, singular weakness: he couldn’t swim.

Even Leonis himself didn’t know exactly why, but even during his time as a human hero, he’d had difficulty with swimming. Blackas had once suggested he might’ve been cursed by the God of the Ocean.

Even after Leonis had fought alongside Rivaiz, the Lord of the Seas, and destroyed the God of the Ocean, he’d remained just as poor a swimmer. To this day, the Dark Lord still didn’t understand why he was so terrible at it.

Leonis walked along the poolside and looked down at the large ship’s deck from across a wire mesh fence at the edge of the level on which he was standing. Sitting along the deck were what looked like six combat machines of some sort.

“What are those…?” Leonis asked Linze, who’d been loitering by the fence for a while now.

“They’re combat planes!” the younger boy replied enthusiastically, pushing up his glasses as his words quickened. “It’s my first time seeing the real thing, too! The big ones are Knight Dragons; they’re loaded with large cannons and are usually used for suppression missions. The smaller ones are Strike Wyverns. They have two multi-rocket launchers and are sent on strike missions. I’ve seen them in the knights’ archives. They’re mostly deployed to carry and assist Holy Swordsmen when attacking Void nests, and—”

“What? Dragons?” Leonis caught a particular word in Linze’s speech.

Even when he’d still been a human hero, Leonis had always held a fondness for dragons. He peered down at the planes below.

My skull dragon is larger, he thought, overcome by an odd sense of rivalry with the human aircrafts.

“Ah, Leo…”

Millet and Tessera emerged from a changing booth, having changed into their swimwear. Millet was in a polka dot child’s swimsuit. Tessera, who was fidgeting bashfully, was clad in a navy-blue bathing suit.

Tessera walked with a reserved gait and meekly seated herself opposite Leonis. Her smooth black hair accentuated the nape of her slender neck. In a few more years, she was sure to grow into a captivating beauty.

“Riselia bought me this swimsuit…,” Tessera said.

“It looks good on you,” complimented Leonis, at which Tessera turned red down to her neck.

“What are you doing, Leo? Let’s get swimming!” Millet made to leap into the pool, an inner tube held in her arms.

“That’s no good, Millet. You have to do your stretches first.” A sudden chiding from Riselia brought the young girl to a halt.

Leonis turned his gaze to the source of the voice.

Huh?!

There was Riselia, his minion, clad in a bathing suit unlike anything Leonis had ever conceived of.

Wh-what kind of garment is that?! Leonis felt his heart skip a beat.

Riselia’s swimsuit showed a lot of skin. The mature-looking black fabric contrasted and accentuated the beauty of her white skin and argent hair. Soft-looking breasts were contained by rather meager pieces of material. The revealing outfit exposed Riselia’s healthy thighs, slender waist, and fair stomach. The bottom piece of her swimsuit was held up by strings tied on either side.

“Miss Selia, you look amazing…” Tessera seemed to have been shocked at the sight of Riselia’s bombastic proportions. She’d even used “miss,” something she rarely did.

“…!” Leonis himself was equally stunned.

“What’s wrong, Leo?” Riselia leaned in with concern. She always tried to speak at eye level when interacting with children, but this time, it meant Leonis’s gaze was fixed directly on her cleavage.

“N-nothing. There’s nothing wrong!” retorted Leonis as he hurriedly looked away.

Riselia was simply too careless when interacting with children.

“If you say so,” Riselia said. She stood and tied up her silvery hair. That done, she approached the edge of the pool and began to stretch.

◆

“Leo, it went that way!”

“Ah, yes… Okay…!” Leo flicked the beach ball with one hand, sending it flying in an arc through the air.

“Ah?! Hyah…!” Tessera, who had caught his pass, fumbled, and the ball fell into the water.

Apparently, her motor skills weren’t well developed. The children of the orphanage likely hadn’t had much practice swimming, as Tessera, Millet and Linze all had inner tubes.

“Aaaah!” Tessera tossed the ball in a random direction.

Riselia caught it handily. In stark contrast to the rest of the group, Riselia was extremely well coordinated. Low-ranking vampires were weak against running water, but she had no such vulnerability.

"Leo, catch…!"

Riselia launched the ball high into the air. Leonis kicked against the water, moving rapidly, and gently passed the ball in Linze's direction.

"Leo, you're cheating," Riselia pointed out as she gazed fixedly into the water. As a Vampire Queen, her eyes had undoubtedly noticed Leonis was using an underwater movement spell.

"I see you're making good use of your vampire powers," Leonis observed.

"Thanks to you, yes," Riselia whispered before turning to face Millet. "Go play with everyone else for a bit, okay?"

"Okay!" Millet nodded cheerfully with the beach ball in her hands.

Riselia then took Leonis by the hand. Her fingers were noticeably cold, but that was to be expected of an undead creature.

"I'll teach you how to swim, Leo," Riselia said.

"I can use underwater movement and water-breathing spells."

He could even walk on the ocean floor by using a gravity sphere.

"But swimming in the water feels good," Riselia insisted.

"The human body was never meant to move underwater— Aah!"

Riselia gently tugged Leonis by the arm, causing him to lose balance in the water…

Boing.

Leonis's face collided with the pillowy chest that'd been hovering right in front of him. All of the sudden, he was overcome by a soft, enveloping sensation.

"Aaaah, Leo!" Riselia cried.

"…I-I'm sorry…*hack*, *horf*!" Leonis hurriedly pulled away, but the moment he let go of Riselia, he swallowed a bit of water and started coughing.

"Don't worry, just relax. Leave everything to me…" Riselia held on to Leonis's body securely as he thrashed and choked. "You can calm down; I'm not letting go."

"…O-okay," Leonis said, pulling his face out of the water.

Riselia's face was right in front of him. Her faint-pink lips seemed tantalizingly close. Wet, silver hair hung over the slender nape of the girl's neck. Leonis felt his body heat skyrocket and his pulse accelerate.

My word. A human body is so incorrigible…

"Stay calm. Dip your head into the water, slowly," Riselia said, backing away while still holding Leonis's hands.

"…"

Awkward though it undoubtedly was, Leonis did as she instructed.

"Kick your legs in the water… Right, just like that."

Tch, why must a Dark Lord such as I endure this humiliation…?

Looking away from the breasts bobbing in the water in front of him, Leonis kicked his feet.

“I’ll add swimming to your training curriculum tomorrow,” Riselia noted.

“N-no, thank you,” Leonis said, blowing bubbles with his face half-submerged.

◆

18:30 Imperial Standard Time.

In her office aboard the ship, Altiria, fourth princess of the Integrated Empire, was preparing for the mixer.

“The outfit suits you well, Your Highness,” complimented one of her ladies-in-waiting.

“Thank you.” The princess smiled gently.

She wore a brilliant party dress the color of white lilies, which helped accentuate her golden hair. Sitting in her arms was a spirit called a Carbuncle, wagging its puffy tail. Standing in front of a full-length mirror, Altiria brought a hand to her chest in silent contemplation.

Miss Riselia and that boy were so dashing.

The memory of the boy, Leonis, lingered in the princess’s mind.

He was younger than me, but he was already a Holy Swordsman.

Altiria had long yearned to be a student at Excalibur Academy. As it happened, she was set to join the royal knights’ academy in the Imperial Capital next year. One day Altiria hoped to be a dashing knight who rushed to the rescue, just as Riselia and Leonis had done today.

And I would love to speak to that lady with the cannon…

The pigtailed Holy Swordswoman who’d blasted that giant Void had been invited to the princess’s party as well. Regrettably, that unknown girl had refused to attend. She’d said she’d only done what was necessary and departed without giving so much as her name. That one had been the most gallant of them all.

It was a firm wish of Altiria’s to be a Holy Swordswoman when she got older, just like that mysterious pigtailed girl. Her status as a princess prevented her from being able to fight Voids on the front lines, though.

“May I enter, Your Highness?” The voice of a knight of the royal guard came from beyond the door to the room.

“What is it?” Altiria replied, nodding to her attendant.

Understanding the meaning of the gesture, the servant opened the door, but then…

“Aaaah!”

The knight knocked the lady-in-waiting to the floor.

“…Wh-what are you—?!”

Before Altiria could scream, royal guards armed with firearms flooded into the room.

“Such insolence! What is the meaning of this?!” Despite Altiria being a twelve-year-old girl in a very confusing situation, she maintained a dignified demeanor befitting one of her status.

“Just getting ready for the mixer, Your Highness…,” replied the knight, peeling off his own face.

“What…?!”

Beneath the facade was a beastman with the head of a black lion. Altiria immediately recognized the man as the leader of the Sovereign Wolves, a radical terrorist organization responsible for the Parliament Hall occupation incident back in the Imperial Capital. This was the anti-imperialist Bastea Colossuf.

“Help! Someone, come help!” Altiria let loose the loudest shout she could muster.

None came to her aid, however, despite the royal guard being stationed on the same floor.

“Heh-heh, you waste your breath, Princess.” A dark elf woman entered the room with a mystifying smile on her lips.

In one of her hands was a pitch-black sword that gave off an eerie sort of mist, and in her other, she carried the corpse of a knight, which she carelessly let slump to the ground.

It was the captain of the royal guard.

“A-Arcus… N-nooo!” Altiria screamed.

Stouthearted as she may have tried to be, Altiria was still a child. Her mental fortitude had its limits.

“You might want to hire some better-trained bodyguards if you intend to keep yourself safe,” mocked the dark elf woman.

“Suppression of the main bridge complete,” said a voice from Bastea’s communication device.

“Understood. We’ll be right over,” the lion-headed man responded. Grabbing Altiria by the arm, he said, “I must ask you to come with me, Your Highness.”

“L-let go of me!” Altiria demanded futilely.

“Be quiet,” Bastea snapped, raising his sharp claws to Altiria’s face.

It was at that moment, however, the Carbuncle curled in Altiria’s arms bit Bastea’s hand. The man flinched from the pain, creating a momentary opening.

“Run!” Altiria screamed.

The spirit fell to the floor and took off like a startled rabbit, disappearing into thin air. It had vanished into the spirit world, which overlaid this one. No one could see it unless they had a spirit user’s eyes.

“Jiraf, go after it,” Bastea said, clicking his tongue and issuing an order to one of his men. Turning his attention back to his captive, he asked, “Is that spirit the *Hyperion*’s master key?”

Altiria didn’t answer. Her jade eyes glared defiantly at Bastea.

“Fret not, we have a spare prepared.” The dark elf woman grabbed Altiria by the chin and sneered. “Letting the spirit run off was a wasted effort, brave little princess. Heh-heh, heh-heh-heh…”

“Aaah… Nng…” Altiria’s eyes clouded over with despair.

Please, someone… Someone, save me…! Altria silently pleaded. For some reason, the face that drifted to the forefront of her mind was that of the boy to whom she’d spoken earlier in the audience chamber.

CHAPTER 4
EVENING PARTY

Having changed back into their regular clothes, Leonis and his group made their way to the party hall, where the many guests had already gathered. A number of tables had been set up, and each sported an assortment of alcoholic drinks. At the center of the hall, a great many cooks were all hard at work preparing various extravagant dishes.

"They're all first-rate chefs who work as purveyors to the royal house," Riselia whispered into Leonis's ear. As the daughter of a noble family, she was privy to such matters.

"…This is amazing. It's hard to believe this is a battleship," Leonis marveled.

"Since Her Highness is on board, this was set up specifically for her visit to the Seventh Assault Garden," Riselia explained. Reaching for one of the glasses on the table, she asked, "What do you want to drink, Leo?"

"Mm, maybe I'll have some wine," he replied.

"Um, Leo…"

"I'm joking."

Leonis took a glass of grape juice.

I really would prefer wine, he thought.

Expecting whatever wine was here to match the rich fragrance and flavor he'd sampled in the past was probably asking for too much, though.

"E-erm… Can we really eat all this…?" Tessera asked timidly.

"Yes, of course." Riselia nodded.

"Okay, Linze, chaaaaarge!" Millet exclaimed like a pirate who'd come across a treasure chest. With a plate in her hand, she took off.

"W-wait, Millet!" Linze ran after her toward the center of the hall.

"W-wait for me, too…!" Tessera, stepping out of her older-sister role for a bit, tottered off after them.

"I'll get your share, too, Leo. Anything you'd like to eat?" Riselia offered.

"I can do it myself," Leonis insisted.

"Well, you always only eat the things you like. You won't grow up big and strong if you don't eat your veggies," Riselia said before heading toward the table.

Having an undead girl fret over my health still doesn't sit well with me…

Leonis looked around the hall. Several Excalibur Academy students were scattered about.

No one I know, though…

"Oh, you're here, too, kid." A familiar voice caught Leonis's ears.

She had clear blue eyes and was clad in a uniform modified to include the traditional garb of the Sakura Orchid. It was Sakuya Sieglinde, the ace of the eighteenth platoon, the same squad of which Leonis was a member.

“What are you doing here, Miss Sakuya?”

“I came for the free food,” Sakuya declared, puffing up her chest proudly.

“No, I… I didn’t mean that,” Leonis murmured, exasperated.

Despite looking like a young, brilliant beauty, Sakuya was quite the deplorable girl on the inside.

“Well, remember how I fought on the front lines during the Stampede? Word of that got around.”

“Oh, that’s why.”

During a recent battle, Sakuya had charged into a swarm of Voids and fought valiantly. Apparently, she’d even been called in to review combat data after the fact.

“I heard you fought the Voids when they attacked the harbor. Good job.” Sakuya patted his head gently.

“No, I didn’t do much.” Leonis shook his head. “Miss Regina was the one who beat the big Void.”

“If you ask me, just the fact that you didn’t run away was brave enough. There were other students from the academy there, but they all ran when the Voids showed up.”

Now that she mentions it, the boys who hit on Regina were students of the academy, too.

That said, they’d only fled in terror because of Leonis’s Aura of Death.

“They ran, even though running when it matters most only brings regret. That’s a feeling that haunts you for the rest of your life…,” Sakuya said, and Leonis noticed a gloominess in her eyes.

“Erm—” He parted his lips to say something.

“Well, I’m gonna get some food,” Sakuya interjected, cutting him off. Her expression returned to normal, and Leonis lost the chance to ask what he’d wanted to. Sakuya took out a small box made of bamboo from the sleeve of her Sakura Orchid garb.

“What’s that?” Leonis asked.

“A traditional Sakura Orchid lunch box,” Sakuya replied, puffing up her chest proudly again.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” Leonis murmured, exasperated.

“I thought I could bring Fluffymaru the Black something nice to eat.”

“Fluffymaru the Black?”

“A dog I’ve befriended recently.”

“I see…,” Leonis replied half-heartedly. “Are you sure you’re allowed to do that?”

It may not have been a strict, ceremonious affair, but even Leonis, with his rather limited understanding of human society, couldn’t help but wonder if taking food home from the party was acceptable.

“Don’t worry, kid. With my skills, no one will notice.” Sakuya smiled and stealthily approached the table.

“No, that’s not what I…,” Leonis tried to say again, but his words tapered off fruitlessly.

The way she’s moving… She really is skilled, Leonis observed, half impressed and half-peeved. He set off with a plate to get some food for himself.

◆

At the central table, the guests bustled together while first-class chefs prepared the food. There was grilled, honeyed fawn meat, goose stuffed with leafy greens, a whole leg of mutton sprinkled with spices and condiments, star snapper stew seasoned with salt and fragrant herbs, chicken soup with vegetables, white fish stew, a vivid-looking eight-vegetable salad, a mountain of freshly baked buns, and a large selection of fruit and ice cream for dessert.

As Leonis considered what to help himself to, his stomach lightly grumbled with anticipation.

…A human body is so awfully inconvenient, Leonis bemoaned as he started loading things onto his plate to placate his boyish body’s demands.

“Leo, you’re only taking meat. You need to balance it out with vegetables, too.” Riselia was quick to appear and chastise him.

“I—I know.” Leonis proceeded to put the bare minimum amount of salad on his plate to satisfy her. “Were the ingredients for this made in the artificial environment’s cultivation plant?”

“Some of them were, but I think the wild game was gathered from the forest,” Riselia answered.

“Forest…?”

“Yes, there’s a vast forest near the Imperial Capital.”

The Imperial Capital, Camelot. It was the crux of the Assault Garden project and situated near vast woods that Voids curiously never dared to approach. The less dense areas of that place were breeding grounds for a variety of animal species.

If it’s truly that large, perhaps it’s the Forest of Origin, Leonis speculated.

The Forest of Origin had been close to the Lognas Kingdom, the place where the Hero Leonis had been born. A thousand years ago, that ancient wood had been the domain of the gods and home to many spirits.

If I’m right, then the capital should be close to where the Lognas Kingdom was…

For a few moments, Leonis considered the maps of the world from his era, but his stream of thought was soon interrupted.

“Riselia, what are you doing here?” A slightly high but clear voice prompted Riselia to turn around.

“…Fenris Edelritz!”

Standing there with her arms crossed was a girl clad in Excalibur Academy's uniform. Her gait suggested the elegance of a noble lady, while her blue eyes beheld Riselia with a certain sharpness to them. She took a step forward, gently brushing back her platinum-blond hair with one hand.

The two beauties glared at each other, each holding a plate.

"Princess Altiria invited us," Riselia answered with a dignified voice, her intonation significantly stronger than usual. "And what are you doing here, Fenris?"

"I came on behalf of the executive committee's president. My word, work in the executive committee truly has piled up ever since the Stampede. I haven't had a single free moment, unlike you leisurely oafs…"

"E-excuse me?!" Riselia glared at her indignantly. As her emotions began flaring up, her silvery hair started to glow slightly with mana.

Her Vampire Queen powers are leaking out?! Leonis thought as he hurriedly tugged at Riselia's sleeve.

"There, there, you two. No fighting," a serene voice called, arbitrating the growing unease between the two young women.

"M-Miss Elfiné?!" Riselia quickly corrected her posture.

Elfiné had appeared from behind Fenris with a wry smile on her lips.

"Miss Elfiné?" Leonis said quizzically.

"Oh, hello, Leo." She beamed at the boy and greeted him with a small wave of the hand.

"I-I'm sorry…" Riselia shrank back, ashamed at how she'd presented herself in front of an older girl she admired.

"So you're attending the mixer as well, Elfiné," Fenris said awkwardly, averting her gaze much like Riselia.

"Yes, they asked me to share the data I'd gathered from the Stampede." Elfiné shrugged.

Her Holy Sword—the Eye of the Witch—was an exceedingly efficient set of information probe terminals that exceeded even the most cutting-edge magical technology. The intelligence it gathered was absolutely priceless when it came to fighting the Voids.

Leonis then realized that if Elfiné's Holy Sword had recorded everything from the day of the Stampede…

I could be in trouble... He began panicking internally.

Elfiné's Eye of the Witch had surely recorded the way he'd mopped up a group of Voids with his sorcery.

"Tch…" Leonis gritted his teeth as he pondered what being exposed would mean for him.

"Don't worry. I erased the data from the orb I sent to Phrenia's orphanage," Elfiné assured Leonis quietly, leaning in and whispering into his ear.

"…Thank you," he replied in a hushed voice.

"But in exchange…," Elfiné added. "You'll have to tell me the truth about that someday, Leo."

“…I will.” Leonis nodded, and Elfiné straightened back up.

Fenris, the girl who’d had a quick face-off with Riselia, then looked down at Leonis with dubious eyes.

“Hmm. So that’s the boy who joined the eighteenth platoon, yes?”

“Yes…”

“My apologies for not introducing myself,” she said, brushing out a few strands of her platinum-blond hair with her fingers. “I am Fenris Edelritz, a member of Excalibur Academy’s executive committee. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Executive committee?”

“It’s a governing organization of students that helps run the school separately from the administration bureau,” Elfiné explained.

I see…

“I’m Leonis Magnus of the eighteenth platoon.” He politely introduced himself.

Fenris, however, narrowed her eyes.

“Leonis, I hear you’re living in the girls’ dormitory?”

“…Erm, yes.” Leonis admitted honestly, nodding.

“Riselia, I must question the legitimacy of letting him live in the girls’ dormitory.”

“Leo’s still a child,” Riselia said in a flustered hurry.

“But he’s a boy. Once he’s older, he could very well be a dark lord in the bedroom.”

“…L-Leo’s not like that! He’s a good boy. Right?”

“Y-yes…” Leonis nodded again, feeling his heart skip a beat.

It was only a short while ago he’d felt his pulse quicken at the sight of Riselia in a swimsuit.

“Whatever the case, should the executive committee find you’re somehow disregarding public morals, we will act,” Fenris declared, turning away.

Before she left, however…

“…Incidentally, I’ve heard you’ve awakened to your Holy Sword.” She stopped in her tracks and spun back to face them. “So if nothing else…I suppose I should say congratulations, Riselia Crystalia.”

“…Huh? Ah, thanks…,” Riselia muttered, as if Fenris’s words had somehow been anticlimactic.

Fenris scoffed and turned again, making a quick departure.

“Do you two have some kind of history?” Leonis asked.

“She’s a…childhood friend. Though she’s more like a bad itch I can’t get rid of…,” Riselia said, rubbing her temples.

The young woman was usually so responsible and mature, it was odd seeing her acting so childish.

I suppose their relationship is like my camaraderie with the Dragon Lord…

Something about Riselia’s brief confrontation with Fenris reminded Leonis of his tumultuous relationship with his nemesis from a thousand years ago. Oddly enough, the rivalry felt nostalgic to Leonis these days.

“Hey kid, look at all these gifts I got for Fluffymaru the Black!” Sakuya said gleefully, presenting the food she’d hidden under her sleeve.

““Put that back!”” Riselia and Elfiné demanded in unison.

◆

…Princess Altiria isn’t at the party yet…?

Regina was wandering aimlessly through the corridor outside the party hall. While she possessed a fabricated invitation, the young woman had hesitated to actually cross the threshold. Had she not been dressed in Excalibur Academy’s uniform, Regina would’ve looked terribly suspicious.

Even if I go to the mixer, I won’t be able to talk to her…

A set of particular circumstances had led to Regina being disowned and sent to live with the Crystalia family before Princess Altiria was born. Regina's little sister never knew Regina's name or what she looked like.

N-no… Even if we can't speak, I can still look at her up close…

Mustering her courage, Regina stood in front of the entrance to the party hall when a white furball suddenly sped by her feet.

"Wh-what?" Regina stopped.

The furball let out a faint, flickering glow.

"Is that a spirit?!" Regina furrowed her brow.

It wasn't one of the Phillet Company's Artificial Elementals. This was an Origin Spirit; the kind you couldn't find anywhere in the city.

…Wait, isn't that the royal family's Carbuncle?!

Regina had seen such a spirit once before in the data archive. It had white, glowing fur and a red gemstone embedded in its forehead. There could be no mistaking it. It was a Carbuncle, one of the three great spirits passed down through the generations of House O'ltriese.

The question was, what was a spirit belonging to the royal family doing here?

Did it run off? Regina wondered.

An installation-type Artificial Elemental was unable to wander off, but it was perfectly possible for an Origin Spirit.

"I should probably catch it, shouldn't I…?" Regina whispered to no one in particular.

If it had run away, the princess and her attendants must surely be in a panic trying to find it. Few people could see a spirit when it chose to mask its presence, so the ship's guards couldn't catch it on their own. Only a Princess Priestess who drew on the blood of the royal family could do that.

And if I catch it, that could be my excuse to speak to Princess Altiria…

As soon as she realized this, Regina took off after the furry little thing.

"…W-wait up… Wait!"

Regina focused her inner eye, as if looking through a rifle's scope. She'd taken the academy's endurance training every day and was confident in her stamina. Following the faint mana trail the spirit left behind, Regina dashed up a staircase to the upper floor.

At the top of the steps was a straight corridor. Regina caught sight of the Carbuncle's flickering form at the far end.

…Got you!

She pushed forward off the floor, her pigtailed hair flapping behind her with the rush of air. Just ahead of where the spirit had fled, a humanoid figure emerged from a corner.

…?! Regina brought herself to a stop, startled.

It was one of Altiria's uniformed royal guards. The young man raised his eyebrows upon catching sight of Regina.

"What's this? I thought all the civilians were down at the party," he said as his lips curled into a faint sneer.

Regina locked eyes with the guard. Something about his attitude seemed odd; he acted too coldly to be one of the princess's escorts.

"E-erm…" Regina took a cautious step back.

The young guard approached her, not seeming to have noticed her unease.

"Can't have you kicking up a racket, can we? Better finish you off…" A tangible bloodlust began welling up within the man.

"Activate!" Regina chanted the word to manifest her Holy Sword.

In the next instant, however, massive claws appeared on the guard's right hand.

"…?!"

"Demon Sword, Activate—Slash Fang!"

Something powerful ran across Regina's body.

◆

Being in a place full of people truly is suffocating.

Leonis snuck away from the party hall and let out a breath he'd been holding after finally escaping to the adjoining hallway. He wasn't good with such lively places. The Undead King preferred dark, silent locales, like Necrozoa's underground mausoleum.

No, even when I was human, I didn't enjoy crowds.

The corridor was silent. Leonis walked down the passageway and entered an elevator, going up to the ship's deck for a breath of fresh air.

Leaving without saying anything might've been a bad idea, Leonis thought as he ascended.

Realizing he could cause his minion undue concern, the Dark Lord summoned a skeleton servant from his shadow. As its bones clattered and assembled into human form, Leonis placed a second-order transformation spell on it. The undead soldier took on a form identical to his own.

It wasn't unusual for the Undead King to need to appear on multiple battlefields at once in order to confuse enemy forces. The trick of it was, trivially enough, Leonis's ability to create many body doubles using sorcery. The one flaw of the spell was the personality of the body double was influenced by the skeleton's own character and idiosyncrasies, but for a temporary, makeshift solution, that was unlikely to cause much trouble.

"Return to the party in my stead," Leonis instructed. "Be sure not to do anything uncalled-for, however."

"Yes, my lord," the skeletal puppet said, lowering its head respectfully.

CHAPTER 5
A MAD PARTY

"…Where did Leo go off to now?" Riselia wondered aloud, looking around the hall with a glass of juice in hand.

While she was busy taking care of Millet and Linze, Leonis had disappeared.

"What's wrong, Selia?" Elfiné asked her.

"Miss Elfiné, have you seen Leo?"

"Maybe he went outside for a breather? Being around a lot of people can be exhausting." Elfiné cracked a strained smile. "Aren't you being a bit overprotective?"

"A-am I…?"

"It's like taking care of a cat. If you're being too clingy, it might run away."

Elfiné tapped Riselia on the shoulder gently and walked off to another table. Riselia, however, was left a little surprised.

Maybe I am *being overprotective…?* The cat charm Leonis had given her vibrated slightly from its spot attached to Riselia's terminal.

For some reason, Riselia simply couldn't bear to leave Leonis alone. The question was *why?* It wasn't just because he was a ten-year-old boy, and she was certain it wasn't because she was his minion, either.

She'd felt that way *ever since she first saw him in the ruins*, after all. Riselia had this strange sensation that felt like she'd known Leonis since long before they'd met.

Why do I feel this way…?

Riselia lifted her face and saw Leonis approaching her.

"Oh, Leo, where were you?"

"I don't like being around crowds, so I went out for some fresh air."

"Oh…" It was exactly as Elfiné had said.

"Miss Selia…," Leonis began, fixing his eyes on her face.

"What is it?"

"You're cute."

"…Huh?!" Riselia's face went red. "Wh-wh-wh-what are you saying?!"

Leonis simply smiled, as if enjoying her flustered reaction.

"Were you lonely without me? You adorable thing, you," he teased smugly.

"L-Leo, what's gotten into you?" Riselia asked, sensing something was clearly off with his behavior and tone.

"I am such a sinful man to have inflicted this loneliness upon you, Miss Selia." Leonis cradled his head in his own arms.

“Did you eat something strange?” Riselia asked, wondering if there might have been suspicious mushrooms in his salad.

Just as she was thinking of calling the ship’s doctor, the lights suddenly went out, plunging the hall into blackness.

“Huh…?”

◆

“Kuh… Ah!”

Regina’s body bounced off the floor a few times before slamming against the wall. Claws flashed, unleashing an invisible shock wave. Had she not manifested her Holy Sword to protect herself, the attack would’ve gouged out her stomach.

…Why is…one of the Integrated Empire’s Holy Swordsmen doing this…?

Bearing the pain, Regina rose to her feet with her Holy Sword manifested in its gun form, Drag Striker. It was then she realized the one who’d attacked her wasn’t a royal guard.

“…What?!”

The person before her had the face of a wolf. It was a beastman. The top of his uniform had been torn apart, revealing a frame much larger than a human’s.

“Tch, using my Demon Sword must have canceled out the other Demon Sword’s power.” The beastman clicked his tongue and licked the claw weapon that had appeared over his right arm.

Regina was confused. Surely, that weapon couldn’t be…

A beastman with a Holy Sword?!

That shouldn’t have been possible. Holy Swords were gifts from the planet to humanity. They were a power meant to oppose the Voids. Regina had never heard of a beastman being able to call a Holy Sword.

No, that doesn’t matter now…

Regina brought up her Drag Striker. It was the third form of her Holy Sword, the Drag Howl, and took the shape of a musket. This made it the lightest and most adaptable of Drag Howl’s iterations.

“Huh. I was trying to cut your heart out, but.…” The wolf beastman smirked viciously as he cautiously drew closer.

…Do I fight him? No, I should run and get reinforcements…

Regina’s Holy Sword wasn’t suited for close-quarters fighting. She’d been trained in hand-to-hand combat that involved weapons, but there was a fundamental and significant difference in physical ability between humans and beastmen.

Excalibur Academy’s training regimen was focused on group-based, anti-Void combat. There were some mock training sessions between Holy Swordsmen, but one-on-one wasn’t their usual fighting style.

“Just stand still and die!” The beastman swung his claws at her.

Here comes that invisible shock wave again!

Regina dropped and lay prone on the ground.

Skriiiiiiiip!

A tempestuous rumbling shook the air as the wall behind her was cleaved through. Regina nimbly rolled on the floor and got back up, firing

Drag Striker. The lightning-laden bullet whizzed through the air, but the beastman flicked it away with his claw weapon.

"Ah-ha-ha, is that all your Holy Sword can do, human?!"

"…!"

Regina fired Drag Striker a few more times, keeping the beastman in check as she retreated backward.

However…

Vrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

"What…?!"

Regina came to a stop as the bulkhead behind her sealed itself shut as though intentionally cutting off her avenue of escape.

"Too bad, girlie. This ship's already under our control."

"What did you say…?!"

They've hijacked the Hyperion? That means…they have Princess Altiria in their custody!

Regina looked down at the spirit curled up at her feet. The Carbuncle had probably run off to get away from the people who'd taken the princess hostage. Regina held up her Holy Sword to keep the spirit safe.

"Die!" the beastman howled as he rushed in, swinging his claws as he ran.

"…?!"

Regina fired her gun reflexively, but an unseen burst of force repelled the shots. She kicked off the wall behind her and moved into a horizontal leap. Shards of the torn-up floor and wall sped through the air, scraping Regina's face as she moved. While she rolled out of range of the wolf-headed man's attack, she fired again. This time, a shot managed to cut into the beastman's collar.

Unfortunately, the beastman's body proved quite sturdy. That one hit hadn't been enough to deal a fatal wound.

"Ha! Too bad, Holy Swordswoman!" The beastman swung his claw weapon down at Regina, who'd fallen over.

Just before the attack could connect, however…

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

With a thundering blast, the sealed bulkhead burst open, and the beastman was sent flying down the corridor.

"…Huh?" Regina couldn't help but make a rather silly expression. Turning around, she saw a young boy holding a large staff standing in the hole that had been blown through the bulkhead.

"…Erm, Miss Regina? What exactly is going on here?"

◆

"Keh-heh-heh. Everyone better stay still if you don't wanna die!"

The door to the party hall slammed shut. A total of thirty-six people, including the party staff, civilian representatives, Riselia, and the others,

had been forced to sit together in the center of the hall. Men wearing the uniforms of Princess Altiria's royal guard stood encircling the hostages.

They were skilled. In the brief moment the lights had gone out, they'd secured civilian hostages, holding blades to their throats to force the combat-capable Excalibur Academy students to disarm themselves and comply.

Tessera, Millet, Linze, and Leonis, the only children in attendance, had been separated and placed in one corner of the hall. The men declared that if anyone made any suspicious movements, they wouldn't hesitate to kill hostages. Riselia and the other Holy Swordsmen had no choice but to obey.

What in the world is going on here?!

Riselia threw a questioning glance at Elfiné, who sat beside her, but her dependable senior simply shook her head wordlessly. The children from the orphanage were terribly frightened. Even the tomboyish Millet was shaking in fear. Curiously, Leonis remained unusually composed, despite having a blade held to his throat.

Why is Leo so calm about this? Riselia was panicking, but when Leonis caught her eye, he sent a playful wink in her direction.

"E-explain yourselves! You're Her Highness's royal guard! Why are you doing this?!" insisted a middle-aged man who served as one of the Seventh Assault Garden's councillors.

"Heh-heh. Think we're part of the royal guard, do you?" one of the young men sneered before peeling back his face.

"What?!" the councillor exclaimed in disbelief.

The false face of the guard was cast away to reveal the open jaws of a large wolf's head.

"A—a werewolf?!"

"What is the…meaning of this…?" Fenris Edelritz of the executive committee muttered, her eyes wide with shock.

"This is the power of my Holy Sword—Face Thief."

"A Holy Sword? Nonhumans shouldn't be able to manifest one!" Fenris shouted.

"What, are you that surprised? Yeah, that's right. The goddess gave us her blessing. The power of a Holy Sword isn't your exclusive privilege anymore, see?"

The goddess? Riselia doubted her ears.

The werewolf man laughed gleefully and peered around at the academy students.

"This is where I'd tell ya to drop your weapons, but that doesn't really work with you Holy Swordsmen, does it?" He then turned to the guard behind him. "Hey, Jakt—"

"I know…" The knight nodded and then began removing his face, too.

From beneath the facade emerged an old elf with tattoos all over his head. With his disguise discarded, his body quickly turned back to that of an old man.

“Demon Sword, Activate. Bomb Apple,” the old man whispered, and a black fruit that let out an ominous miasma appeared in his hand. Then, the wrinkled elf tossed the apple into the group of hostages.

“Wh-what did you do?!” Fenris asked.

“A b-bomb…of vapor. If you use…your Holy Sword…I’ll…detonate it.”

“?!” Riselia and the others swallowed nervously.

“What do you want?!”

“We’re members of the Sovereign Wolves,” the werewolf explained with a smirk.

“…Terrorists who advocate anti-imperial sentiments,” Riselia muttered. She’d heard of the Sovereign Wolves before.

They were a political faction formed around the Shamar clan, a group that both possessed great power and harbored anti-imperial sentiments. They advocated for the abolishment of demi-human discrimination and opposed the human rule of the Integrated Empire, spearheading terrorist acts that had taken the lives of over two hundred people in the Imperial Capital.

I hear their leader, Bastea Colossuf, went into hiding…

“We’re going to negotiate with the capital. We’ll demand the release of our incarcerated comrades in exchange for the *Hyperion*, Princess Altiria’s safe return, and your lives.”

“The empire won’t yield to a terrorist’s demands!” Fenris retorted.

“Heh-heh. I guess we’ll see, eh?” the werewolf said with a toothy grin.

…Communications outside the ship must be shut off. Riselia bit her lip.

Something was jamming connections in the *Hyperion*. In all likelihood, Excalibur Academy’s administration bureau wasn’t aware of what was happening yet.

“…Miss Elfiné,” Riselia whispered.

“Don’t worry,” Elfiné whispered back, holding Riselia’s hand tight in her own “For now, let’s just wait for our chance.”

◆

“So what exactly is going on here?” Leonis asked Regina as he tied up the unconscious beastman with a shadow.

On his way up to the deck, the bulkheads had suddenly started closing around Leonis, trapping him between two of them. Left with no choice, he’d used explosion spells to blow open a path, which was where he encountered Regina fighting the beastman.

“Your guess is as good as mine. By the way, these bulkheads are military-grade enchanted steel. How did you break through?” Regina knitted her eyebrows suspiciously.

“Um, huh, so who’s this beastman?” Leonis looked away as if to dodge the question and fixed his gaze on the unconscious figure he’d bound.

“I think he’s a surviving member of the Sovereign Wolves, a group of anti-imperial terrorists,” Regina said, tapping her information terminal with

a finger. “His face is a match for one of the people in the database’s wanted list.” She showed the screen to Leonis. Sure enough, the picture displayed on the device looked identical to the unconscious beastman sharing the hallway with them.

“How did he get aboard the ship?” Leonis wondered aloud. He and Shary could travel via magical shadow corridors to enter almost any place, but a mere werewolf shouldn’t have been able to perform such high-level sorcery.

“They probably snuck in during the confusion following the Void attack. Also, this beastman impersonated one of Her Highness’s royal guards.”

“He disguised himself?”

“Not exactly,” Regina shook her head. “He definitely used some kind of special power. It was the ability of a Holy Sword, I think.”

“A Holy Sword?” Leonis tilted his head questioningly. “Aren’t Holy Swords only granted to humans?”

“Yeah. I’ve never heard of a demi-human using one before,” Regina said, turning her attention to the beastman slumped over in a corner. “This werewolf didn’t call his power a Holy Sword, though… He called it a Demon Sword.”

“…A Demon Sword?” Leonis echoed her words suspiciously.

A Demon Sword, as opposed to a Holy Sword. Leonis wondered if it was merely a simple case of wordplay or if there was some deeper meaning to it.

He was granted little time to consider the idea, however, as a tremendous creaking sound shook the floor beneath them.

“Is the ship moving?” Regina asked in surprise.

◆

A group of demi-humans stood with their hostage, the princess, on the main bridge of the *Hyperion*.

“I’ve closed all the bulkheads in the ship. Is this what you wanted?” Altiria asked, her voice trembling slightly. She bit her lip so hard, it was turning white. An Artificial Elemental in the shape of a frightening serpent was coiled around her arm. The repulsive sensation of linking with an unfamiliar spirit gave Altiria goose bumps.

…I can’t believe they created something like this.

Creating Artificial Elementals required secret technology known only to the royal house and the Phillet Company. Terrorists shouldn’t have had a spirit strong enough to manipulate the *Hyperion*.

“Heh-heh-heh, splendid. Such is the power of a princess with the blood of the three progenitor royal houses,” cackled the bewitching dark elf woman, Sharnak, as she stuck out her red tongue.

“…!”

Altiria glared at her resolutely. Despite the look, she proved unable to resist the dark elf woman. The knives at the throats of the bridge crew meant Altiria had to do everything they said. If she were to disobey their orders, the terrorists would mercilessly kill their hostages.

“Doing this won’t make the empire yield to your demands.”

“I guess we’ll see about that,” Bastea Colossuf, the leader, coldly shot back with a sneer. “We have you and this battleship in our custody. I think the safe return of everyone aboard is a good enough deal to persuade them to release our comrades.”

With that ferocious smile on his lips, Bastea grabbed the princess by the throat with his large hands.

“…Nnng, aah… Guh, aaah…!” Pain ran through Altiria’s body as the beastman’s thick lion claws dug into her flesh.

“Your Highness!” one of the crew members cried.

“I’d love nothing more than to tear your throat out, but you’re worth more alive for the time being.” Bastea’s intense, feline eyes were full of a deep hatred for the empire and the royal family.

“Heh-heh-heh, you mustn’t do that. The goddess has business with this princess,” Sharnak said, chiding him lightly.

“Hmph…” Bastea released the princess, and her petite form crumpled to the floor.

“Kah, nng…,” she coughed, trying to fill her lungs with air.

Suddenly, the ship’s operator went pale as he said, “A—a vast amount of biological reactions have been confirmed along the ship’s course…”

“A Void reef,” Bastea muttered. “Evade it and go northeast, toward Carsez Island. We’ll regroup with our comrades who’re hiding there to restock our supplies and manpower.”

“…Understood.” The operator nodded.

“Oh, *that’d be a problem*…,” Sharnak cut in.

“What?” Bastea turned a suspicious gaze on her.

“Maintain our course and run the ship into the Void reef,” she instructed.

“Are you insane?!” Bastea shouted. “Did you completely lose your marbles, you damn witch?! If we enter the reef, the Voids will swallow the ship whole with us inside!”

“Yes, that’s precisely the idea.”

“Wh-what…?!”

Sharnak licked the blade of the black Demon Sword in her hand with an ecstatic expression. A shade of definite madness settled over her crimson eyes.

“…You. You’re a priestess for the Cult of Downfall,” Bastea declared.

“Would you mind not lumping me together with those suicidal cultists?”

“Don’t try to hide it, you dark elf hag!” Bastea Colossuf howled, activating his Demon Sword. A broadsword wreathed in crimson flames appeared in his large, burly hands.

“Oh, you incorrigible little fool…,” Sharnak sneered as her black Demon Sword let out a sudden flash.

At that moment, the flames around the Demon Sword in Bastea’s hands flared up wildly, consuming him rapidly.

“Gaaah… Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Trying to kill me with the Demon Sword I granted you is a fool’s errand.” Sharnak cackled as she looked down at the beastman being consumed by the fire.

“Y-you cursed…witch!”

“I’ve no more need of you, Bastea Colossuf. Though I will be putting your adorable little subordinates to good use.”

In a matter of moments, Bastea had been reduced to dust by the flames that had erupted from his own Demon Sword. The other beastmen showed no response to the abrupt death of their leader. With emotionless, doll-like faces, each kept his blade firmly trained on the hostages.

“…”

Altiria remained silent and glared at Sharnak. Before her stood a deranged woman who dared to grin gleefully after having killed her own comrade. It was clear the act hadn’t been to save Altiria, either. The dark elf gave off a far more menacing air than Bastea ever had.

“Heh-heh. Now then, Princess…” Sharnak turned to face her, stepping over the ashes on the floor. “You heard me, yes? Keep the ship on its current course.”

“…I—I refuse,” Altiria replied, mustering all the courage she could.

If the ship were to enter a Void reef, the whole vessel would be lost. Even if they took the crew and passengers captive, she couldn’t accept such a demand.

“My, now that is a bother.” Sharnak cocked her head as if troubled by something trifling.

“Wh-why would you even do such a thing…?” Altiria asked.

“Heh-heh. Why, to create more Demon Swords, of course,” Sharnak replied.

“Demon Swords…?”

“Yes. To create a Demon Sword, one must taint a Holy Sword. In other words, the only sacrifices fit for the goddess are Holy Swordsmen who have been corrupted by the miasma of nothingness.”

What is she saying…? Altiria was truly and purely terrified by Sharnak’s manic mutterings.

This isn’t someone I can reason with…

“…I’m a princess of the empire. Even if you take my life, I will never do as you say!”

“Oh? Now, that’s a pity. But I’m afraid your compliance isn’t a factor.”

Sharnak recited an esoteric chant, and the Artificial Elemental serpent coiled around Altiria’s arm began to writhe wildly in answer. A surge of information rushed into the princess’s mind, forcing her unconscious.

“N-noo… Noooooo!”

“Now, let us offer up a sacrifice in celebration of the goddess’s arrival!”

Sharnak’s mad laughter filled the room.

CHAPTER 6
LOST QUEEN

"Is the *ship moving*?" Leonis furrowed his brow.

The floor beneath them jolted and shook. There were no windows in the corridor where he stood, so the only clue was the rocking beneath his feet. It seemed, however, that the *Hyperion* was sailing away from the Seventh Assault Garden at a rapid pace.

"They probably took over the ship's control core," Regina said with a panicked expression. "They've got Her Highness, and they're probably forcing her to obey…"

"The princess?" Leonis asked back.

Does having the princess in their custody have something to do with moving the ship…?

"Members of the royal family have the power of the Princess Priestess. They can use the power of spirits. This ship's core system makes use of that, allowing them to manipulate the Artificial Elementals that control the vessel."

"I see. So in a manner of speaking, the princess is the *Hyperion* itself…"

Weapons with living sorcerers as their cores had existed in Leonis's time, as well. They were mobile fortresses of a sort. Recalling that helped Leonis grasp the situation quite quickly.

The *Hyperion* was likely built so it could function even without someone to operate the core, but it only showed its true value as a weapon when commanded by a master from the royal family. Leonis wondered if perhaps the visit to the Seventh Assault Garden had also doubled as a trial run for the princess.

"Yes, except…" Regina looked down at the thing nestled against her chest.

It was a white, soft furball with a red gemstone set into its forehead—the princess's Origin Spirit.

"Even the princess shouldn't be able to directly control the ship without using this Carbuncle, a spirit of the royal house, as a medium…," Regina explained.

"You're surprisingly knowledgeable about the royal family's spirits, Miss Regina," Leonis pointed out.

"Th-that's not true. This is, uh, common knowledge. Everyone knows that!" Regina said, blatantly avoiding Leonis's gaze. "Uhh…you want some candy, kid?"

"…"

Leonis watched Regina with his eyes narrowed in suspicion as she took a candy from a pocket of her uniform.

“Miss Regina, are you a bad liar by any chance?”

“Uhhh…” Regina gave a small, resigned sigh and leaned toward Leonis. “…Fine. I mean, given the situation, I probably should tell you… But it’s a secret. You can’t tell anyone.”

Leonis nodded.

“Princess Altiria is my little sister,” Regina said.

“…Your sister?! Doesn’t that mean—?”

“Yes. My real name is Regina Ray O’ltriese. House O’ltriese’s *former* fourth princess.”

◆

Fifteen years ago, on the day Regina was born, an ominous star had been visible in the heavens. Its red glow had been seen as an ill omen since ancient times. A rule of the Human Church stated that any children born to the royal house on the days that star appeared were either to be killed or sent to a convent in the mountains for the rest of their lives.

However, Riselia’s grandparents resented that dictum, and Duke Crystalia flexed the authority of his noble house to take Regina instead.

A star of ill portent. It would seem that such superstitions have survived into this new era as well…, Leonis thought to himself with no small amount of irritation. Upon closer inspection, he quickly realized just how similar the princess was to Regina. Both had beautiful golden hair and large green eyes. The resemblance was actually uncanny.

“So you came to this ship to meet your sister?”

Regina nodded.

“I figured if I went to the wharf, I could at least see her from afar,” Regina admitted with a sad smile. “That’s how I could control the spirit in the library, too. I was never trained, though, so I’m not as good as my sister.”

She had inherited the power of a spirit user from the royal family’s bloodline. Leonis nodded in understanding while Regina looked back at him, her green eyes blinking in surprise.

“…Aren’t you shocked?” she asked.

“About you having a little sister?”

“No, me being from the royal family.”

“Oh.”

Most people certainly would’ve found it startling. Leonis, however, had known many of royal lineage both during his time as one of the Six Heroes and after he’d become the Undead King. Despite looking like a black wolf, his lifelong friend Blackas was prince of the Realm of Shadows.

“Anyway, I think I understand now, Miss Regina,” Leonis said, turning his eyes to the tied-up beastman. “So what do these people want?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I’d guess they want to negotiate for something with the empire by holding the ship and the people aboard for ransom.”

Leonis let out a sigh.

What a tedious reason.

There’d been people who did such things a thousand years ago as well. Even with the threat of the Demon Lord’s Armies closing in on them, humans fell prey to many internal struggles.

Thanks to all that infighting, we seized control of what would’ve been an otherwise impregnable kingdom.

Regina touched one of her earrings, turning on her communication device.

“I can’t get through to Lady Selia. I think it’s safe to assume they’ve taken control of the party hall.”

“I’d assume so, too,” Leonis agreed.

There were multiple academy students at the party, but if the terrorists had taken hostages, they’d be unable to fight back.

“I don’t think the administration bureau is aware of this yet,” Regina added.

“So we’re the only free agents at the moment,” Leonis concluded.

Since the enemy had kidnapped the princess, the royal guard and the ship’s crew had either been killed or were being held captive somewhere. Leonis and Regina, however, had skirted past enemy detection thus far. Regina had boarded the ship illegally, and Leonis’s duplicate was still in the hall. It seemed unlikely the enemy was aware of the two of them wandering about the *Hyperion*.

Still, those terrorists have made a rather bold play. Leonis smiled indomitably. They will learn firsthand what happens to those who dare lay a finger on a Dark Lord’s kingdom.

More than hijackers, though, there was something else concerning Leonis.

…A Demon Sword, eh?

The biggest mystery Leonis had encountered since his reincarnation was the power of the Holy Sword. If there was someone who possessed a way to grant that power to nonhumans…

Then I will need to capture them and acquire their secret for myself. Leonis got to his feet with staff in hand.

“Miss Regina, we need to save Her Highness.”

“Right,” Regina said seriously, nodding. “But the hall—”

She bit her lips. Doubtless she was concerned for Riselia and her other friends. They could split up or perhaps retake the hall first so they could join forces with Riselia and the others to storm the bridge.

Neither would be prudent, though, Leonis thought.

“Our most certain course of action would be to launch a surprise attack on the bridge and regain control of the ship,” he asserted. Leonis went on to

explain there were two reasons for this. The first was that the assailants likely had more people stationed in the hall since they would need to keep multiple targets suppressed. The second was that regaining control of the ship would undoubtedly make securing the party hall much easier. There was even a chance the terrorists could surrender in such a situation.

"Put another way, attacking the hall first would arm the people who took over the vessel with the advantages of information and time."

"…Understood." Regina nodded, satisfied with his reasoning.

The explanation was only pretense, however. Leonis didn't share his truer purpose with her. Taking control of the hall would be easy with his overwhelming power, but he couldn't risk exposing his full strength as a Dark Lord.

"Let's hurry, then." Regina got up, her Holy Sword in hand.

"Do you know which way it is to the bridge?" Leonis asked.

"This little one will show us the way," Regina said, looking down at the Carbuncle still at her feet.

"It's quite attached to you, Miss Regina," Leonis observed. "Despite it being a spirit of the royal house."

"He's the same as you in that regard, kid," Regina retorted playfully.

"I'm not very attached to you, to be honest," Leonis fired back, shrugging.

"Wow. Color me shocked." Regina's pigtails drooped a bit in disappointment.

"I'm only joking," Leonis appended apologetically upon seeing she really did take it badly.

Shrugging once again, Leonis chanted a telepathy spell.

"Shary."

"Yes, my lord?"

"Head for the party hall on the lower floor. In the event that danger befalls my minion or the subjects of my kingdom, you have my permission to kill the enemy."

"Understood, my lord," came the calm, coldhearted voice.

As ditzy as she was as a maid, Leonis trusted in Shary's skills as an assassin. He would have loved to call Blackas to his aid, too, but since the ship had sailed out to sea, he wouldn't be able to use the shadow corridors to reach them.

I suppose I really am overprotective of my minion, Leonis thought, regarding himself with a sardonic grin.

◆

Is the ship going somewhere? Riselia looked around worriedly.

The floor of the hall had begun rocking back and forth, implying the ship was moving at considerable speed. Both of Riselia's hands were tied tightly behind her, and manifesting her Holy Sword would detonate the Bomb Apple sitting in the middle of the ring of hostages.

Riselia didn’t know how powerful the blast would be, but if nothing else, she imagined the students sitting directly around it would be killed.

Leo…

Riselia turned her gaze to where the children had been sectioned off. Millet and Linze were crying, and Tessera was patting their backs encouragingly, holding in tears herself. Surely Tessera felt some responsibility for the other two as she was older than them.

Curiously, Leonis still seemed utterly unperturbed… Noticing Riselia looking at him, he met her eyes, regarding her with a small, confident smile.

…And I’m sitting here worried about him! Geez! Riselia grumpily puffed up her cheeks.

Leonis aside, Tessera and the children were clearly at their limits.

“Hey, quit crying! Be quiet!” One of the beastmen violently grabbed Millet by the hair.

“…Stop that!” Riselia couldn’t help but get to her feet.

“What was that?”

“Please. Let go of the children…”

“Like I’d listen to you,” Gerðr the werewolf said, smirking.

He walked up to Riselia and ran the blade of his Demon Sword along the nape of her neck.

“…!”

A few locks of silver hair fell to the ground.

“D-desist!” Fenris called out shrilly.

“I’m actually not opposed to human females, see? Just need to break you in a little, right, pretty girl?!”

He brought the tips of his claws to the buttons of Riselia’s uniform, intending to pluck them away. Just then, a crashing sound echoed throughout the room.

“What was that?!” Gerðr exclaimed at the interruption.

Riselia turned around, only to see…

“Oh, hey. Sorry. I broke a plate by accident.” Sakuya was seated on one of the chairs, eating a fish dish with a fork.

“What the hell are you doing?! You’re supposed to be tied up!” Gerðr shouted.

“I cut through it with the knife. I couldn’t eat that way,” Sakuya said coolly, bringing another piece of fish to her mouth.

It was the food she’d concealed in her sleeve earlier.

“A-are you shitting us?!” One of the beastman guards grabbed Sakuya by the arm, but the moment he did that, he stiffened, shivered, and took a step back.

“What’s wrong with you?!” Gerðr bellowed at him.

“Th-this chick, she’s from the Sakura Orchid…!”

“Huh? So what?”

“They’re a group of sword masters whose homeland was destroyed in a Void Stampede. The survivors became a group of lunatics who go around

hunting Voids so they can exact revenge on the Void Lord that commanded that attack."

"…" Sakuya finished her food and obediently presented both of her hands to the beastman. "What? Aren't you going to tie me up?"

"…N-no sudden moves, you hear me?!" The beastman timidly bound Sakuya's wrists together.

"Tch, what a buzzkill…," Gerðr said, pushing Riselia away and heading back to the children.

Thank you, Sakuya… Riselia regarded her underclassman with a silent bow of gratitude, but Sakuya shook her head as if to say, "Don't mention it." Riselia sat back down.

"I'm going to disable the bomb," Elfiné whispered into her ear.

"…?!"

Riselia shot a questioning glance at the other girl. Elfiné turned her gaze toward a certain spot on the ceiling. Riselia followed her eyes and spotted a faintly glowing orb hidden inside one of the hall's magical lamps.

When did she manage to do that?!

Perhaps it'd been the moment the terrorists had rushed into the hall. The very second the lights had gone out, Elfiné had reflexively activated her Eye of the Witch and sent out a single orb.

I can't believe she did that all so quickly.

Thankfully, none of their demi-human captors had noticed yet.

"I'm analyzing the bomb's capabilities right now," Elfiné muttered.

Her expertise lay not just in tactical analysis of the Voids but also in parsing the power of different Holy Swords. Normally, she used it to give advice as to how to better draw out the strength of the weapons, but it also enabled her to find weaknesses in the Holy Swords of others.

If Miss Elfiné can neutralize the bomb…

Then Riselia and the others would be able to launch a surprise attack on the terrorists and overpower them.

But what do we do…?

As calmly as she could, Riselia attempted to devise a plan that would overcome the deadlock. If she were to show any sign of using her Holy Sword, the enemy would trigger the bomb.

What if I used a power that wasn't tied to a Holy Sword?

A bolt of inspiration suddenly struck her.

◆

In a dark corridor, illuminated only by emergency lights, stood a girl in a maid's outfit. She wore a consternated expression.

"…Where am I?" she whispered, cocking her head in confusion.

Unfortunately, there was no one who could answer her question. Despite being an assassin of the Realm of Shadows, one skilled enough to be considered a confidant to the Undead King, Shary had absolutely no sense of direction.

While she'd managed to find her way through the city, a ship with identical-looking sectors and hallways like this one may as well have been an enchanted labyrinth that moved while one wandered through it. The many lowered bulkheads hardly made things easier.

Shary truly had no idea which way to go.

At this rate, my master will scold me!

Using a whip formed of darkness, Shary cut cleanly through one of the metallic barricades. She'd been told not to damage the ship too much, but there was no other choice given the circumstances.

"A-anyway, I need to find that big open place my master told me about…"

Thus, Shary set out running, heading in the opposite direction from the party hall.

◆

Riselia bit her lip, letting the blood run and drip down to the floor beneath her. The little crimson droplets didn't seep into the carpet, however. Instead, they simply stayed where they were, vibrating.

The image of a blade, thin and sharp…

Riselia closed her eyes, focusing the mana coursing through her body. The blood elongated and stretched, forming a blade thinner than a piano wire. The crimson sword traveled silently across the carpet, creeping toward the old man who'd set the Bomb Apple.

No one noticed. None of them could've possibly suspected a vampire capable of manipulating mana was in that very room.

"—Analysis complete. It's not a response-type bomb. It's detonated by having mana sent to it." Elfiné's whisper tickled Riselia's ear. "I can't completely diffuse it with just one orb, but I can use just one to release a pulse that should jam the directional mana wave and delay the detonation. At best, it'd only buy us one second."

That brief instant was going to be Riselia's only chance to defeat the elf before he could detonate the bomb. If she managed to break his concentration, his Holy Sword should fade away.

And if I fail, several academy students will die…

As Riselia concentrated with her eyes closed, cold sweat dripped down her forehead. She couldn't afford to make any mistakes or to have anyone realize what she was doing if she was to succeed.

"Hey, what are you doing?!" the werewolf, Gerðr, called out sharply.

Did he notice me?! Shivers ran down Riselia's body.

It was not Riselia, however, who the werewolf had barked at. Rather, it was Leonis, who'd abruptly risen to his feet.

Leo?! Riselia's eyes snapped open.

With the focus on her mana slightly disrupted, the blade of blood shivered slightly. Riselia hurriedly concentrated on it again, forcing it back into shape.

Wh-what is he doing…?!

“Where do you think you’re going, brat?! We told you to stay still!” Gerðr snarled.

“I’m bored. Besides, my lord’s mana is just about to run out,” Leonis replied calmly.

“…Stop spouting nonsense, you little snot!” Gerðr picked up Leonis by the collar.

“…L-Leooo!” Tessera screamed.

Leonis simply shrugged with a composed expression.

“Don’t get too cocky, kid.” Gerðr held the edge of his Demon Sword to Leonis’s neck. “Heh-heh, not that I’d want your sorry mug.”

“Gerðr, that woman…said not to kill the Holy Swordsmen hostages… needlessly…,” warned the old elf who’d produced the Bomb Apple in a low tone.

“Like I give a shit. Who cares if I dismember a kid or two, huh?!”

The werewolf parted his jaws and licked his lips. At that exact moment, however, Leonis’s appearance contorted and twisted, transforming into a cackling, rattling skeleton.

“…Wh-what the hell?!” Gerðr exclaimed, involuntarily releasing what had appeared to be just a child. This time, Leonis was the one to grab him—or rather, the thing that used to be Leonis took hold of the startled werewolf. A blue mana glow began emanating from the bones of the skeleton.

“…?!”

“I shall remove my lord’s enemies. Melgest.”

Booooooooooom!

An explosion shook the air, sending Gerðr’s body flying backward.

“…L-Leo?!”

Riselia had no clue what had just happened, but an inky smoke began filling the air, clouding the vision of everyone in the room.

“Selia!” Elfiné called.

Riselia ran mana through the blood she had sent across the floor.

“You!” The old elf fired a jolt of mana from his fingertip to detonate the Bomb Apple, but to his surprise, it didn’t explode right away. The Witch’s Eye’s powerful jamming delayed the discharge by a single moment. That briefest of instants proved to be all that was needed.

Vwooooosh!

Riselia’s blade of blood shot up like a whip, slashing into the elf’s right arm.

“Aaah, aaaaaaaaah?!” Blood flew through the air.

Having lost the will of its user, the Bomb Apple broke apart into particles of light.

“D-damn it, kill them!”

The numerous beastmen moved to do as commanded and prepared to thrust their claws into the nearest hostages.

Shing!

A spark of lightning flashed through the air.

"—Too slow."

Sakuya stood with her katana-shaped Holy Sword, Raikirimaru, in her hands. In the blink of an eye, she'd knocked two of the demi-humans unconscious. Somehow, she'd cut the rope that had bound her hands together just as she activated her Holy Sword.

"F-fall back!"

Having realized the tables had been turned on them, the terrorists sprinted toward the hall's doors.

"Activate—Frost Wolf!" Fenris called out.

A pack of seven wolves made of ice charged toward the fleeing beastmen from behind. One by one, the former captors were frozen in place. In but a few moments, the party hall had been reclaimed.

◆

"…Leo?!"

Riselia scrambled toward what she believed to be Leonis's crushed, shattered remains. Bones littered the ground, and his cracked skull clattered around on the floor.

"L-Leo… No, no…!" Faced with the boy's skeletal remains, Riselia fell to her knees.

"Calm down, Selia. That wasn't Leo," Elfiné said, placing a hand on her friend's shoulder.

"…What?"

"I sampled Leo's mana data before, and that…thing's wavelength was different from his. It was a wholly nonhuman reading."

"Wh-what does that mean?" Riselia asked, looking down at the broken cranium.

The fractured thing rattled at her. It was very similar to the many skeletons Riselia had destroyed while training that morning.

"A body double?" Riselia realized at last.

"I'd assume so, yes," Elfiné said with a shrug. "I knew his Holy Sword was a multipurpose type, but it really is very versatile."

"So you knew from the begging that Leo was a fake?"

"Yes. Though I'll admit I didn't expect him to explode."

"No wonder you were so calm…" Riselia puffed out her cheeks and flicked the cackling skull with a finger. "That Leo and his pranks…"

If this pile of bones wasn't the real thing, then Riselia had to wonder where the true Leo had gone.

With the ship in such a dire state, she worried the terrorists had caught him. Her speculation came to an end as the hull of the *Hyperion* shook and trembled.

"We should escape while we can," Elfiné said in a grave tone.

“My Frost Wolves can help guide and guard the civilians until they get to safety.” Fenris snapped her fingers, ordering the Frost Wolves to rip apart the hostages’ ropes with their fangs.

At the same time, Elfiné deployed all eight orbs of the Witch’s Eye. The floating spheres linked up with the ship’s terminal. Elfiné then used them to download a map of the ship’s structure and searched for the lifeboats.

“Wait, Riselia, where are you going?” Fenris called as the silver-haired girl rose to her feet.

“I’m going to look for Leo,” she replied.

“Selia, that’s dangerous.”

“It’s too dangerous!”

Both Elfiné and Fenris tried to stop her at the same time.

“I’ll be fine. You two focus on getting everyone out!” Riselia declared, kicking open the door to the hall and rushing out.

“Selia…,” Elfiné tried calling after her one last time.

“I’ll go with her, too. You should focus on making sure everyone here gets to safety,” Sakuya said.

“All right, Sakuya. I’m counting on you,” Elfiné agreed.

With a nod, Sakuya took off after Riselia.

Elfiné glanced down at her terminal, as her Holy Sword had just finished acquiring all the data from the ship. What she saw caused the color to drain from her face, however.

“No, this can’t be…!” she exclaimed.

“What’s the matter?” Fenris peeked at the screen and went as pale as Elfiné.

The *Hyperion* was moving at maximum speed toward countless blinking red dots.

“…Is that a Void reef?!”

CHAPTER 7
THE TWO QUEENS

“Roar and bellow! Drag Howl!”

Booooooooom!

An explosion rocked the air as Regina’s shot blasted through a bulkhead made of military-grade enchanted steel. The Carbuncle soared through the air in a hurry, with Leonis and Regina following after it. Naturally, all the elevators were inactive, so to reach the bridge, they had to use either the central staircase or the emergency one.

Busting through the ceiling with magic would be so much quicker, Leonis thought. Such a tactic put the princess at risk of being caught in the crossfire, however.

“Miss Regina, don’t run too far ahead…,” Leonis insisted.

“I’m the older one here.” Regina turned around to face him as they ran up the stairs. “I can’t let you take the lead.”

“No, it’s just that I, erm…I can see your…”

“…Huuuh?!” Regina went red and pressed her skirt down over her behind.

Excalibur Academy’s uniform stressed mobility, so its skirt was very short. Leonis got a good flash of Regina’s mature, black panties.

“Y-you’re a perv, aren’t you, boy?!” Regina scolded him with her eyes narrowed scornfully.

“I-it was an accident!” Leonis insisted, claiming innocence.

“I’m going to have to report this to Lady Selia, aren’t I—?”

“Please don’t,” Leonis hurriedly implored.

Their exchange was cut off as a new voice echoed from above.

“Who the hell are you?!” someone shrilly called out to them.

A pair of beastmen had appeared on a landing just ahead.

“Miss Regina!”

“Holy Sword, Exchange—Drag Striker!” Regina quickly loosed a barrage.

“Accuracy Augmentation, Curse Blast!” Leonis matched Regina’s timing, applying augmentation magic to her.

Booooom!

The shots hit their mark, exploding and sending the beastmen flying.

“Wh-whoaaaa?!” Regina teetered slightly at the force of her own attack.

Oh, curses, I bolstered her too much!

“Th-that was amazing, Miss Regina!” Leonis said, quick to feign ignorance.

“Those weren’t explosive shells. They were normal blasts. I think their trajectory changed slightly, too…,” Regina replied, clearly unconvinced.

“Y-you must have imagined it.”

From the landing, Leonis and Regina continued down a corridor, handily defeating any beastmen who barred their way. Again and again, Regina loosed fiery shots from her Holy Sword.

“Over there, that’s the bridge of the ship!”

The Carbuncle turned transparent and passed right through the door.

“Drag Howl!” Regina launched another powerful blast that blew the door in. “Princess Altiria!” she cried as she burst into the room. What met her eyes was not the scene she’d expected, however.

“…What’s… What’s going on here?” Regina whispered in shock.

The bridge was *completely deserted*. The ship’s control system was operating without anyone in the room.

“Look!” Regina beckoned Leonis over as her eyes caught sight of a console’s screen. Her expression went stiff with fear and despair.

“…What’s this?” There was a large blip on the display Leonis assumed to be the *Hyperion*. It looked to be on a course for a cluster of numerous, smaller dots.

“That’s a Void reef.”

◆

Sharnak and her subordinates had gathered on the *Hyperion*’s deck. Lightning flashed through the sky as a storm raged. Several beastmen were carrying Princess Altiria into a fighter plane’s cargo hold.

Each of the foolish beastmen who had accepted the power of a Demon Sword were by now Sharnak’s marionettes. More precisely, they were under the control of the Demon Sword clutched in the dark elf woman’s hands.

Between Sharnak’s fingers rested Zolgstar Mezekis, one of the Dark Lord–slaying weapons collectively known as the Arc Seven.

It was a different sort of item than the ones Sharnak had given the beastmen. Zolgstar Mezekis was a true Demon Sword and had been granted to her by a priest of the goddess. As a legendary weapon, it was said to have been wielded by a hero a thousand years ago.

Yes, I have been chosen by her…, Sharnak thought confidently.

“…Where are you taking us?” Princess Altiria asked in a faint voice.

“Heh-heh, oh, someplace wonderful,” Sharnak replied with a sadistic smile. “You should consider yourself honored. Once I dissect your brain and pick apart the royal family’s powers, I’ll make you the plaything of the cult’s sadists. Or maybe I’ll let you serve as a seedbed for the monsters of emptiness. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“…?!”

Letting out a maniacal laugh, Sharnak held the Demon Sword aloft.

Under the moonlight, the masterless *Hyperion* charged through the waters, moving ever closer toward the reef shrouded in a blackness that surpassed the darkness of night itself.

"Now, let us hurry," Sharnak ordered the beastmen under her command. "Assuming you don't want to be swallowed, too, of course."

◆

Riselia and Sakuya hurried down a corridor lit only by the flickering emergency light. There was no sign of anyone else in the hall. The echoing sound of the *Hyperion*'s creaking hull was interrupted by the occasional peal of thunder.

The floor wavered and shook beneath the two young women. It was likely the ship was nearing its maximum cruising speed.

"Look over there. The bulkheads have been destroyed," Riselia observed, pointing ahead.

There was a large hole in the center of the massive, military-grade barricade. Debris and shards of metal littered the floor around it.

Did Leo do this…?

"Miss Riselia…," Sakuya called as she ran to catch up.

"What's wrong?" Riselia stopped and turned around.

"They're coming." Narrowing her eyes, Sakuya turned to face what appeared to be empty air. Despite the apparent lack of any opponent, she drew Raikirimaru.

"…Huh?" Riselia wasn't aware of any unusual presence, but it seemed obvious the younger swordswoman could see something. There was a heavy rumble of thunder from outside the *Hyperion*, and then…

Crack, crack!

The sound of fracturing glass began to ring out, as though the air itself was starting to give way.

"Voids?!" Riselia manifested her Bloody Sword and wrapped her hands tightly around its grip.

Crack, crack, crack!

Countless fractures tore themselves into being, and as they widened, a creature robed in dark-gray vapors began to emerge.

"…Urrr… Rggggl…"

Sturdy limbs with claws and fins pulled a slippery gray body from the fissures in space. What should've been the Void's face bore no nose or eyes, only a large, horizontal tear lined with teeth.

"…A merman class…"

This was a type of Void that appeared on the seafloor. It was highly intelligent and capable of moving rapidly not just underwater but also on land.

"It's coming!" Sakuya called out, and she kicked off the ground.

Unsheathing her sword, Sakuya loosed a horizontal slash in one elegant motion. The Void dissolved into a miasma and disappeared before it could

even let out a final cry of death. Surges of electricity ran across Raikirimaru's blade. Unfortunately, there were already new tears forming around Riselia and Sakuya.

"…?!"

Once more, the electrified katana flashed forth, cleaving another Void that had appeared from a floating fissure. Sakuya then used the backswing to move into another swipe and from there into a rising horizontal cut. With each swing of the blade, Sakuya's movements grew more agile.

"Ultimate Blade Technique, Third Form—Sakura War Flurry!"

Sakuya's blade roared. The ability of her Holy Sword—Raikirimaru, Blade of Lightning—was acceleration. The electricity it produced was just a by-product. Its true power was that it enveloped Sakuya in super-electromagnetic energy, allowing her to move faster the more she cut into her foes. The girl herself looked like a blade of blue lightning as she sped toward the swarm of Voids.

"Hyaaaaaah!" Riselia let out a battle cry as she charged at the Voids as well, Bloody Sword in hand.

A merman class emerged from the wall and was immediately cut clean in half. Riselia thrusted the tip of her blade into the special fissure, slaying another Void that had only just started to crawl out.

Using her superior vampire strength, Riselia leaped into the air, instantly closing in on a new group of Voids as she brought her Holy Sword to bear. Her training with the skeletons had proven fruitful; she was clearly far more accustomed to fighting groups now. As she struck, Riselia unleashed the large stores of mana coursing through her body, fighting in a manner truly befitting a Vampire Queen.

Why are Voids appearing inside the ship?! Waving away the miasma that clouded the air, Riselia peered out the window…

A timely bolt of lightning illuminated the water's surface, revealing a thick layer of gray vapor hanging over the sea.

"Is this a Void reef?!" she exclaimed, incredulous.

Void reef was the term used to describe a Void nest that formed in the sea. They were said to be hellish places from which there was no escape.

What are those beastmen thinking…?!

The *Hyperion* should've had a radar capable of detecting and evading the Voids. Riselia could only guess at whether the hijackers had plotted an incorrect course or if they'd done this intentionally.

Thankfully, for the moment, only smaller classes of Voids seemed to be appearing. If the *Hyperion* was drawn any deeper into the reef, however, the risk of a larger class showing up was high.

"At this rate, we'll—!"

Yet another crack formed in the air, from which a new type of Void crept out. It was humanoid but larger than the merman-class Voids. Disgusting, mollusk-like tentacles grew out of its head, as if multiple sea creatures had made their home inside its cranium.

“A Brain Eater!” Riselia exclaimed.

It was a much stronger type when compared to the merman class. Not only was it more intelligent, but it was also capable of using mysterious powers. It was said Brain Eaters had a high likelihood of becoming Void Lords.

Excalibur Academy classified them at a rank-A danger level, meaning it was a Void considered too dangerous to be challenged by a single Holy Swordsman. Riselia swallowed nervously as she stood facing the creature. Sakuya slashed at another Void and leaped over to Riselia so the two young women were now standing back-to-back.

“Miss Riselia, you should go on ahead. Leave these guys to me.”

“…No. I’m going to stay and fight with you,” Riselia declared.

“Go find the kid. Isn’t that why you came in the first place?” Sakuya asserted with an intensity that left no room for argument.

“…!”

“Don’t worry. I live to hunt down Voids.”

Riselia felt a shiver run down her spine.

“Please, Miss Riselia…”

“…Okay.” Riselia nodded and charged into the swarm. Listening to the fading sound of her friend’s footsteps, Sakuya readied Raikirimaru. Sea-devil Voids appeared one after the other around the Brain Eater, yet even in the midst of such a daunting situation, Sakuya remained collected.

“Good. I didn’t want you to see what came next,” she said coldly.

A black stream of miasma rose up from Sakuya’s small body, *the same kind of vapor that Voids expelled.*

“Demon Sword, Yamichidori… Grant them the silence of the grave.” Sakuya brought her fingertips to her lips and gave a bewitching smile.

◆

“…A Void reef?” Leonis asked Regina, whose expression was frozen in abject terror.

The various luminous icons on the screen meant nothing to Leonis. He trusted Regina could read it, however.

“It’s a closely packed force of Voids that inhabit an area of the sea. Unlike hives, reefs are constantly moving, so tracking their position is difficult…” Regina trailed off and wiped the sweat from her forehead. “Even a ship like this won’t be able to escape if it’s swallowed up by a Void reef.” The pigtailed girl’s voice was thick with despair.

“…And the ship is heading straight for it?” Leonis inquired.

Regina nodded solemnly.

Hmm, I don’t understand…, thought Leonis. The people who’d seized control of the *Hyperion* had presumably done so to use the hostages aboard as leverage in negotiations with the Integrated Empire. If that really was the goal, Leonis failed to see how abandoning the bridge and setting the vessel on a suicide run would achieve anything.

Suddenly, a shrill alarm began to blare from somewhere nearby. Regina jumped at the startling sound and turned to look in its direction.

“Knight Dragon takeoff…approved…?” Regina slowly read aloud the words displayed on the screen.

Knight Dragons were the larger kind of fighter plane stationed on the *Hyperion*.

“They want to escape with the princess,” Leonis stated, having pieced things together.

If that’s the case, though, they’ll be abandoning many of their own people and leaving them to die.

Had this always been the terrorists' plan, or had there been some kind of disagreement that had fractured the group during the hijacking? Either way, those fleeing aboard the plane clearly wanted to make the *Hyperion* sinking into the reef look like an accident. That way, the empire would believe the princess had died while, in truth, she'd secretly been spirited away.

And they'll leave no sign that whoever planned this ever existed.

The emptiness of the Voids would consume all the evidence, and the *Hyperion* would sink to the depths.

Is that really all, though?

Leonis got the impression there was some irrational, bottomless malice at the root of this plan. Everything about it felt terribly out of character for an antiestablishment group.

Now's not the time to think about that, though.

"Miss Regina… You can't steer the ship, right?"

"No. I didn't take any sailing courses in my curriculum…" Regina bit her lip, her expression thick with dismay.

Leonis could summon a Ghostship Captain from his shadow, but it wouldn't be able to commandeer a warship made with such advanced magical technology. They needed a solution, fast. Every second spent idling moved them closer to the Void reef.

"…No, at this rate, we'll all—" Regina clenched her teeth and slammed her hand against the controls.

But then…

"Is…someone…there…?"

"Huh?" Regina turned at the sound of a weak, static-filled voice.

It hadn't come from the bridge's microphone. Surprisingly, it was emanating from the Origin Spirit sitting on the operator's seat.

"…Carbuncle?"

"Can…you hear…me…?"

The sound was feeble, as if it could cut out at any moment. With so many Voids nearby, the interference was incredibly severe, distorting the voice the spirit was emitting.

"That's Princess Altiria…!" Regina said confidently.

While garbled, Regina would know that voice anywhere, having heard it countless times in the archives.

"Is Her Highness's voice reaching us by using the spirit as a medium?" Leonis asked.

Regina nodded hurriedly.

"Y-yes, I can hear you… I can hear you clearly!" Regina cried out desperately.

"Listen to me… There's a control room that steers…this ship…on the… bottom floor."

"Okay!"

“It’s the Hyperion’s heart… It’s where the Artificial Elementals controlling this ship are managed… Bring this little one there, please… Stop the…Hyperion…!”

“I don’t know if I can… I’m not a very powerful spirit user.”

“You should be fine… Carbuncle should…handle everything.”

“Understood!”

“…Ple…ase… The master code…is…”

The voice trailed off after giving the necessary password for the control room.

“…” Regina bit her lip.

While she and Leonis had confirmed Princess Altiria’s survival, the terrorists who had abducted her were about to escape. If Regina didn’t go after them now, she risked losing her last chance to save her sister. The decision was undoubtedly a torturous and difficult one.

“Let’s go down to the control room.” Regina finally forced the words out, clenching her fists. She turned her back to Leonis and picked up the Carbuncle.

“We can’t let this ship be swallowed up. She wants everyone aboard the *Hyperion* to get out safely…,” Regina continued, her shoulders trembling.

Though her face was averted, Leonis still spotted small tears trickling down Regina’s cheeks. He did his best to act like he hadn’t noticed them.

“No, let’s split up. I’ll go save the princess,” Leonis declared.

“…Just you?” Regina turned to look at him. “No, it’s too dangerous. They won’t go easy on you just because you’re a kid.”

“It’s our only way of saving the princess,” Leonis calmly insisted.

“…It is, but…” Regina made a hesitant expression. Her clashing opinions on the idea were plain, but there was no time to waver. If the terrorists escaped, all would be lost.

I’ve got no choice, I suppose. Leonis took hold of his Staff of Sealed Sins and turned its tip toward a wall that barred the way to the outside of the ship.

“There’s actually something I’ve kept secret from you, Miss Regina.”

“…Huh?”

“The truth is…I’m a Dark Lord.”

Ka-boooooooooom!

Using a third-order spell to blow open the wall, Leonis created a makeshift exit to the exterior of the ship. Through the storm, he and Regina could spy the distant deck where the planes were preparing to take off.

Utterly stunned, Regina stood frozen after bearing witness to the sliver of power Leonis had deigned to demonstrate.

“Well, maybe ‘Dark Lord’ is a bit of a joke, but…” Leonis shrugged as he approached the broken wall. “I’m probably much stronger than you think I am.”

Regina gazed at Leonis as if seeing him for the first time.

“Just who are you, kid…?”

“So with that said, leave saving Her Highness to me.” With a nod, Leonis took off into the rain outside.

“Kid!” Regina called after him.

My word, I really have grown soft.

Using a gravity control spell to slow his descent toward the nearest deck, Leonis smiled wryly. If Blackas were to hear of this, he’d undoubtedly be shocked beyond words. Despite having intended to keep it secret, Leonis had showed Regina a bit of his power. He trusted it to be all right, however. That girl wasn’t one to tell others about private matters.

Besides, kidnapping princesses is a Dark Lord’s job.

Looking down at the deck rising to meet his feet, Leonis chanted a telepathy spell.

“Miss Selia.”

“…Ahhh! Leo?!” Riselia’s panicked voice rang out in Leonis’s mind. “… Wait, huh? Why am I hearing you? Am I hallucinating?”

“I’m using the cat accessory as a magical relay for my voice. You’re a mage’s minion, so you should get used to things like this.”

“*A-all right. I’ll try*,” Riselia said, attempting to accept what was going on.

“I’m glad you liked it enough to keep it on you.”

“*Yeah. You gave it to me, after all*,” replied Riselia, a hint of bashfulness in her voice.

“…” Leonis suddenly felt a bit awkward after hearing that answer, but he cleared his throat dryly. “Where are you right now?”

“I’m going around the ship, looking for you.”

“Excellent timing,” Leonis said. “Regina’s heading for the control room at the bottom of the ship.”

“Regina’s doing what…?!”

“Yes. She’s going alone, so it’s probably pretty risky. Go help her.”

“The control room at the bottom of the ship. Got it,” Riselia answered at once.

While she likely hadn’t even known Regina was aboard the *Hyperion* to begin with, Riselia was wise enough not to start asking questions in such a dire situation. Leonis added a few points to his evaluation of his minion.

With any luck, she’ll mature quickly and become my right-hand woman.

The fighter planes on the dock lit up with red lamps, signaling their imminent takeoff.

“You think you can escape a Dark Lord, you fools?”

Light blazed from the Staff of Sealed Sins.

—Your Dark Lord orders you. Rise, ye festering cadavers, and strike terror into the hearts of the living—

The bones he summoned from his shadow rose up and began assembling themselves, forming the shape of a massive monster.

◆

“I’ll open the bulkheads. Everyone, step back,” Elfiné ordered as she operated the module on the corridor wall.

Elfiné, Fenris, and the other Excalibur Academy students were escorting the party guests to the hangar containing the lifeboats. Fenris had her Frost Wolves go ahead and sniff out any surviving terrorists while Elfiné worked to open bulkheads in their way.

Cracking a military system proved challenging, but thankfully, the controls used Artificial Elementals developed by the Phillet Company. Being the daughter of that same corporation, Elfiné was familiar with the system.

The lock released with a small thud, and the heavy, metal door slowly began opening. To everyone’s surprise, there appeared to already be a group inside the lifeboat hangar.

“Voids!”

“Grrraaaaaahhh…!”

A group of merman-class Voids were everywhere one looked. Several civilians screamed at the sight of their distorted features.

“Frost Wolf!” Fenris called out, sending seven of the frigid things into the swarm to attack the Voids. “This place isn’t safe!” she added.

“Yeah…” Elfiné made a troubled face.

The *Hyperion* was already entering the reef. If they sent the people out on lifeboats, they’d just wind up as sitting ducks. Even with Fenris’s Frost Wolves tearing into them, the Voids were appearing faster than they could keep up with. It was a disheartening sight.

Elfiné turned around to face the children from the orphanage. The oldest of them, Tessera, was hugging Millet and Linze close in an attempt to calm them.

“Are you all right?” Elfiné asked.

Even as she shivered, Tessera looked up and nodded.

“Leo… He’ll definitely save us, so…!”

“We can’t hold them back for much longer!” Fenris called out.

The merman-class Voids parted their tear-like mouths and charged toward the people.

Whoosh!

There was a sound like the very air being cut in two, and Void heads went flying.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

A blade of darkness danced through the hangar, cutting the monsters down one after another. In mere moments, the horde of Voids was considerably smaller.

“Wh-what is this?!” Fenris looked around the hangar, but there was no one in sight.

Elfiné’s Eye of the Witch found the source of their good fortune, though only for a brief moment. It was a girl in a maid’s uniform, standing in the darkness with a half-eaten churro in hand.

“This is in appreciation of your faith in my master, girl.”

◆

“We should hurry, lest the Voids end up swallowing us, too.”

While the storm continued to rage, the large Knight Dragon’s propellers were starting to rotate. The massive, wyvern-like fuselage was nearly ready for takeoff. Sharnak stood on the deck with a satisfied smirk and prepared to board a smaller vessel.

But then…

“…What?” She furrowed her brow.

The Knight Dragon seemed unable to launch. Its blades spun rapidly, but the aircraft stood stuck in place, as if something was pushing against it with the same amount of force the plane was exerting. The front of the Knight Dragon began to bend from the pressure, and sparks sprayed out.

“…What are you doing?!” Sharnak shouted angrily.

A thundering bolt of lightning illuminated the sky, and the dark elf caught sight of something massive descending upon her from the darkness above.

Roooooooooooooooooooooar!

The howl echoed as if rumbling up from the depths of the earth. Sharnak charged her eyes with mana and peered around in the black of the night.

Lightning flashed yet again.

“What?!”

What the dark elf saw was a dragon. A mystical beast that had reigned over all in ancient times. Its fearsome talons were holding down the front of the plane, preventing it taking off.

It wasn’t just any dragon, either…

“What…is this…?!”

This was a creature made of countless bones. A black miasma of death trailed up from its maw like smoke, and its eye sockets were filled with an ominous light.

“Did you think I would let you escape so easily, sneak thief?” called a voice in the dark.

While it hadn’t come from the dragon, Sharnak felt it to be no less menacing. Standing atop the dragon’s head was a boy holding a staff. He cast his gaze down on the dark elf, as if lording over all.

“You will pay dearly for the sin of menacing my kingdom.”

CHAPTER 8
THE ARC SEVEN

The sound of metal being crushed and bent out of shape pierced the air. A massive skull dragon tore the plane's propellers off with its powerful jaws. The state-of-the-art aircraft sputtered for a moment before falling silent.

The undead dragon roared, its crimson eyes shining menacingly as a deathly vapor escaped its parted jaws.

"The fact that one would think to dub such a pile of trash and bolts with the lofty name of a dragon is pure insolence," Leonis spat out in displeasure, holding his Staff of Sealed Sins to the heavens.

Balls of light manifested above him, casting rays down on the deck. Leonis gazed below at the surrounding area from atop the monstrous bone creature's head. After a moment, his eyes locked on to the black-haired dark elf clutching a Demon Sword in her hand.

That must be the ringleader, Leonis concluded.

Something about her seemed different from the other terrorists.

"Dark elf. Are you descended from the Hazashin clan?" Leonis called.

"What?"

"So you don't know about them. Hmph…" Leonis shrugged.

The Hazashin clan was a tribe of dark elves skilled in assassination. A thousand years ago, they had formed the bulk of Necrozoa's covert forces. Had this woman been a descendant of that tribe, Leonis might have shown her some mercy.

"Were you the one who granted the beastmen their Demon Swords?" Leonis asked.

"…You… Who are you…?!" Sharnak ignored the question, instead responding with her own confused and frightened inquiry.

"You will answer what I ask," Leonis stated firmly, increasing the intensity of his Aura of Death.

The beastmen surrounding Sharnak to defend her all fell to their knees at that mere influx of Leonis's power. The dark elf woman proved more resistant to the aura, but she still swallowed nervously and took a step back.

"Hmph. Very well, then. I shall answer your question first. I am a Dark Lord."

"…"

There was a brief period of silence. Then, the woman's mouth fell open.

"…Heh-heh. Ah-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" A manic, high-pitched cackle escaped her lips.

"What's so funny?" Leonis demanded coldly.

“A child like you claims to be a Dark Lord?!” The woman’s expression contorted in hatred as she summoned mana in her hands. “How dare you assume the name of the almightyyyyyyy!”

She’s using sorcery!

Black flames leaden with cursed energy swallowed up the skull dragon’s large frame, taking Leonis with it.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! I don’t know who you were, but it seems today wasn’t your lucky day!” Sharnak screeched gleefully.

“Oh? How so?”

“…I-it can’t be!”

Sharnak’s dark fire had been handily deflected by the skull dragon’s mana barrier, fizzling out almost immediately. Leonis let out a long, exasperated sigh.

Seeing her use sorcery made me expect something more, but if that’s all she can manage…

Given how much sorcery had been forgotten in the last millennium, the dark elf undoubtedly would’ve seemed exceptionally powerful to most people. To Leonis, however, her magic was little more than child’s play. To begin with, she’d used a spell Leonis himself had devised: Black Flame Inferno. If he recalled correctly, he’d created it in celebration of Necrozoa’s completion…

“Allow me to demonstrate to you what *true* sorcery looks like.”

Leonis waved his staff lightly and chanted the same incantation Sharnak had.

Whoooooooooooooooooooooooosh!

Thick flames rose up wildly, causing the three planes behind the dark elf to explode at once.

“…N-no… This is… That’s a secret spell of the Dark Lord of legend…” The elf woman staggered back, her expression stiff with disbelief.

The skull dragon grabbed hold of Sharnak, its bony fingers winding around her body.

“Ahh!… Ngh… Khhh… What is this? Who are you?!”

Though Sharnak squirmed and thrashed as she loosed one spell after another, all were deflected by the skeletal creature’s mana barrier, and she was unable to free herself. The skull dragon tightened its grip, and Leonis could hear the visceral sound of cracking bones.

“Stop clamoring, fool. I have some questions you are going to answer,” Leonis commanded, his voice like ice.

“…Ugh… Gah…”

“What’s your objective?”

“D-drop…dead…”

Leonis had the dragon tighten its grip yet again, and a sound like a branch being snapped reached his ears.

“…Ngghhaaahhh! Demon…Swords…to produce more Demon Swords…,” Sharnak admitted.

“Is that so…?”

At the Undead King’s command, the skull dragon slackened its grip on the dark elf.

“And what are Demon Swords, exactly? Are you capable of granting that power to others?”

“Aah, nng, aah…I…bestow a power…that is the opposite of a Holy Sword…”

“I see. So unlike a Holy Sword, one doesn’t awaken to this power. It’s something that is given.”

“Th-that’s right! W-we should be allies!” the woman screamed in a desperate bid to win Leonis’s favor. “I can give you a Demon Sword! With the power you already possess, you’re sure to rise through the ranks of the cult. The goddess will most certainly smile upon you!”

“Wait. *What did you just say?*” Leonis’s expression changed.

“I… I said…we should work—”

“Not that! Did you just speak of the goddess?” Leonis pressed. “The gods should have fallen to ruin a thousand years ago. What goddess? What’s her name?”

“…Her…name is…” Sharnak gasped.

“Yes? What is it?!” Leonis leaned forward expectantly.

At that moment, however, the dark elf woman’s lips contorted in a maddened smile.

“Her…name is… Name is… Name, name, name, namenamenamename!”

“…?!”

Sharnak’s black Demon Sword suddenly tore into her own throat.

What?!

A spray of blood bloomed from the dark elf’s neck, dyeing the skull dragon’s chest red. Her head now wrested from its perch, the strange woman’s body melted away.

Did she kill herself?! No, I don’t think so…

The bubbling remains of Sharnak coiled around the Demon Sword and began to swell. Blood and flesh writhed, assuming the shape of a disgusting monster.

I see. That woman wasn’t the ringleader. It was…

At last Leonis understood. He knew the identity of the creature forming before his very eyes.

◆

Regina desperately ran down a corridor cast in crimson by the emergency lights. The ship’s hull was creaking audibly, though perhaps that was the sound of Voids clawing their way into reality. It was hard to tell. Apparently, a water pipe had been damaged, because the floor was flooded.

I have to hurry.

Leonis had promised to save her sister, Princess Altiria, and had headed for the deck where the terrorists were waiting all on his own.

I'll let the kid save her. I have to...

Regina's task was to regain control of the ship and turn it away from the Void reef. At the end of the corridor, she could see a door. The Carbuncle, which ran ahead of her, let out a cry. It had to be the control room.

Crack...

It seemed things weren't going to be easy, however, as a fracture carved its way through the air in front of the door.

"...?!"

Regina stopped in her tracks. Voids pushed their way out of the tear in space. A swarm of writhing sea devils approached her. Regina held up her Holy Sword to protect the Carbuncle.

"Out of my way!"

The Drag Striker spewed fire, its bullets gouging through several of the monstrous beings at once. Unfortunately, it was like trying to scoop out an ocean with a spoon. The Voids were appearing faster than Regina could fell them.

"No! Not when I'm so close!"

Again and again she fired. Though she slayed many of them, squirming tentacles gradually coiled around Regina's legs.

"N-nooooooooooooooo!"

At this rate, she would be dragged into the swarm forming at the other end of the hall! That's when a streak of light cut through the room, slashing through the many aquatic Voids.

"Regina!"

The argent-haired swordswoman had appeared just in the nick of time.

"Lady Selia!" Regina called out.

"I made it!" Riselia said with a smile.

Riselia lunged at the Voids, her silvery blade shining as it moved in an arc through the air. Droplets of the girl's own blood stretched and transformed into razor-like shapes that carved through even more of the horrid monsters.

"Incredible...," Regina muttered in amazement.

"Regina, I'll handle these ones!" Riselia cried.

"Yes, Lady Selia!" Regina got to her feet and sprinted forward, following the Carbuncle. "Exchange—Drag Howl!"

She blasted her way through the control room's doors and dove inside.

"So this is the control room!"

It was a rather confined chamber. Floating at its center was a shimmering, blue mana crystal. That gemlike object was what supplied magical energy to the Artificial Elementals controlling the *Hyperion*. Regina held up the Carbuncle and knelt before the crystal like a practiced Princess Priestess. The Carbuncle's form disappeared into the mana crystal.

Regina's mind linked with the *Hyperion*.

◆

The storm only seemed to be getting worse. The monster that had appeared matched Leonis's skull dragon in size. Eight black blades clad in a miasma writhed like a spider's legs. A single, shining crimson eye sat in the center of its swollen abdomen, gazing directly at Leonis.

This repulsive behemoth had come to be by using the dark elf's body. As Leonis looked the horrid thing up and down, however, he cocked an eyebrow.

"…What a surprise. I never imagined I'd see this blade again." The words left his lips *as if greeting an old friend*.

Yes, those eight pitch-colored blades were a familiar sight to Leonis. Even in the sorry state they were in, he could never mistake them.

"The Evil-Rending Sword, Zolgstar Mezekis."

The weapon was an old friend of his. It was one of the Arc Seven, given to him by the gods… A hero named Leonis Shealto had once held this Dark Lord–smiting sword.

In total, the hero had wielded four Dark Lord–slaying weapons. The eight-bladed Holy Sword, Zolgstar Mezekis, was the second he'd been given and had been lost in a battle with Veira, the Dragon Lord, that had ended in a draw.

The presence of such an object raised many questions. How had it found its way here? What had transformed it into such a monster?

"I don't suppose you've returned to serve your old master, have you?" Leonis asked in self-derision as he beheld the twisted weapon's current form.

A thick vapor spewed from the monster. The thing was repulsive enough to even draw pause from the Undead King himself. Something about it gave Leonis the same feeling he'd had when battling Arakael Degradios, the Archsage of the Six Heroes, below the Seventh Assault Garden.

This was a Void Lord—a being that led the Voids born from nothingness.

To think even a legendary weapon could be consumed by the Voids… Leonis glared into the massive eyeball located on its spiderlike stomach. The dark elf woman had only been a puppet of sorts. This Holy Sword, corrupted by the Voids, was the true master here.

Does that mean this Void planned the whole thing?

Unsure if that was even possible, Leonis rejected the very notion. Arakael had somehow retained a portion of his intelligence, but this Void Lord had a Holy Sword as its core. Surely, it was incapable of proper thought.

Someone must have given Zolgstar Mezekis to that woman…

Whoever that had been was likely the one pulling the strings behind the hijacking.

That woman definitely said "goddess," Leonis recalled. That could very well have been a reference to the one for whom he was searching. With the dark elf dead, however, Leonis's only clue was the putrid, writhing monster standing before him.

No matter what, I must reclaim that weapon.

Gripping his Staff of Sealed Sins, a faint smile etched its way across Leonis's face. As if in answer, Zolgstar Mezekis widened its singular eye and jumped into the air. By that time, Leonis's spell was already complete, however.

"Al Gu Belzelga!" Leonis unleashed his spell at the Void Lord that had leaped into the dark night sky. It was an eighth-order spell and the strongest tactical-class fire element spell, Grand Annihilation Fireball. Crimson flames danced through the darkness.

Ka-vooom!

A rumbling explosion shook the air. Leonis's spell had called upon the fires of the Realm of Muspelheim, creating a heat so intense, it was able to reduce a firedrake to ashes. The monster's eight blades let out a pale glow, however, and the moment the flames made contact with it, they were snuffed, as if being absorbed by the weapon.

I see it hasn't lost the Holy Sword's innate ability to diffuse magic.

Magic resistance was one of the more common abilities granted to the Arc Seven. When Leonis had wielded Zolgstar Mezekis in the past, it had easily slashed through a dragon's breath. The blades of the Holy Sword cut a rising arc, crushing the skull dragon's massive frame. Countless bones were pounded to dust. Leonis jumped away from his dragon construct, already chanting his next spell.

"Cadavers that slumber in the battlefield, may death give you no peace… Zoa Raisilor!"

The scattered bones floated up and began rebuilding themselves with startling speed. Gathering together, they formed a massive earth dragon that loosed a hollow sort of roar. It parted its large jaws and crunched down on Zolgstar Mezekis. It then whipped its head down, smashing the spiderlike abomination into the deck of the ship.

Crrrrrrrrraaaaassshhh!

The *Hyperion*'s hull rumbled as a massive hole was punched into the floor. Leonis held up his staff and unleashed another tactical-class spell.

"Voira Zo!"

It was an eighth-order spell that trapped its target under a large sphere of gravitational force. Even with magic resistance, the sheer strength of such a spell should have been enough to crush the fleshy creature.

Though it struggled, the Void Lord remained trapped against the deck, unable to move under the tremendous power weighing down on it.

"Now then, for the finishing blow," Leonis said, and he snapped his fingers.

The massive earth dragon made of bone turned its head again. At that exact moment, however, a tear in space appeared, and the Void Lord disappeared.

What?!

Sensing something behind him, Leonis wheeled around and held up the Staff of Sealed Sins, using its handle to deflect the incoming blow.

…It teleported?!

Zolgstar Mezekis had no such innate ability. This must have been a power it had gained upon becoming a Void. Arakael never used such a power, so Leonis hadn't been expecting it. The Void Lord swung its eight blades, which had once been used to slay countless monsters and dragons.

Leonis jumped back in retreat, and the skeletal earth dragon leaped forward to defend its master. It was swallowed up in a whirlwind of slashes that crushed it to bits in a single swipe.

Those bones were rare! Leonis didn't have time to bemoan that loss, however. The Holy Sword's blades were closing in on him.

"Farga! Farga! Farga!"

He unleashed the fourth-order spells in rapid succession. The Holy Sword's magic resistance rendered them powerless, but the flashes and shock waves they produced provided enough of an opening for Leonis to distance himself a bit.

The crimson eye of the Void Lord shone through the dark night as it fixed its glare squarely on Leonis. Perhaps the monster was spurred by its nature as one of the Arc Seven to slay Dark Lords.

This is more troublesome than I thought it'd be. Leonis clicked his tongue as he moved away.

This wasn't as grand and menacing an enemy as the Archsage Arakael had been, but Zolgstar Mezekis was a weapon made to destroy beings like Leonis. Given that he wasn't presently capable of melee combat, this was the worst possible match for him.

If I use a tenth-order spell like Arzam, it might be able to do some damage.

Leonis's opponent seemed unlikely to grant him the time to chant such a powerful spell, however. It was for this reason he couldn't draw Dáinsleif, the Demon Sword granted to him by the goddess. Drawing it would deplete all his mana, anyway.

If only Blackas were here. He would crush this thing handily. Leonis clenched his teeth.

Shary specialized in assassination and wouldn't be able to keep Zolgstar Mezekis pinned down. Admittedly, Leonis did have one more combat-capable being sealed in his shadow, but…

That one will take any chance it can get to kill me.

Leonis couldn't afford another opponent when the situation was already this difficult to control. Deciding on a different tactic, Leonis opened a shadow gate and summoned his Death Knights. These were a group of twelve skeletal knights armed with magical weapons and riding on bone horses.

Once, they had been Necrozoa's imperial guard, revived from the remains of the Rognas Kingdom's greatest heroes. Each was a one-man

army. Even against a legendary Holy Sword, they wouldn't fall easily. To ensure their victory, Leonis cast a sixth-order spell called Calamity Moon.

A crimson moon appeared in the heavens, piercing the clouds of the storm. It augmented the undead by granting them the powers of a Dark Lord. The Death Knights, acting in the Undead King's service, raised a silent battle cry as they charged toward the Void Lord.

"Raaaaaaaah!"

The Void Lord's blades seemed to sing out in response. Suddenly, a pillar of light erupted from the depths of the raging ocean. It hadn't come from the sea itself but from the Void reef within it. Countless Voids had responded to the call of the Void Lord as it prepared to swallow the *Hyperion*.

Crack… Crack… Crack…

The air around Leonis began to splinter and fissure as a swarm of sea devils slithered out of the fractures in reality. It occurred to Leonis the Demon Sword had likely been responsible for the harbor attack as well. A polluted miasma began filling the air.

"…This isn't good." Leonis looked behind him, his eyes falling on one of the large aircraft that had been damaged by his skull dragon. Sitting inside it was Regina's little sister, Princess Altiria. Leonis swung his staff and formed a death barrier around the plane.

Turning his back meant giving the enemy an opening to exploit. Leonis had promised to save the princess, however, and he refused to go back on his word. A Dark Lord's honor simply wouldn't allow such a thing.

Zolgstar Mezekis roared, prompting the countless Voids that had appeared out of thin air to rush at Leonis.

I have to make it! Leonis spun back around and held up his staff in a desperate attempt to shield himself.

At the same time, a missile launcher set on the *Hyperion*'s broadside opened up, unleashing a flurry of small projectiles to rain down on the swarm of Voids before they could reach their prey.

Ba-boom, boom, boom!

Consecutive explosions shook the deck. Flames surged through the air, blotting out the dark sky. All around, a shrill alarm was blaring.

"So you made it," Leonis whispered, a satisfied smile on his lips.

Evidently, Regina had gained control of the *Hyperion* at last.

"Groooooooooooooooooooh!" The Void Lord howled, twirling and twisting its eight blades. Just then, the airplane-launching catapult set into the floor opened.

"—Leo!"

A single shadow emerged from the aperture, spreading its wings to soar into the night. The pair of mana wings left a red trail in their wake, illuminating a bolt of billowing silver hair. Clutched in the flying person's hands was a Holy Sword that cleaved through the cloud of Voids.

It was the Dark Lord's minion, the Vampire Queen.

“That was quite the entrance, Miss Selia,” Leonis observed.

“I—I mean, Regina said it was the fastest and coolest way…,” Riselia stammered and then turned around, her argent hair whirling with the motion.

“Miss Selia, I’ll lend you my knights. I need you to buy me some time.”

“Your knights?” Riselia furrowed her brow.

The Death Knights Leonis had summoned stepped forward, as if rising to serve their queen.

“They’re all unrivaled heroes in their own rights. Command them in my stead.”

“A-all right!” Riselia nodded curtly, still somewhat confused.

She swung her Bloody Sword like a conductor, and the trickle of blood flowing from her wrist twisted into a crimson blade that protected her from oncoming attacks.

“Follow me, everyone!” Riselia cried, and she brought her weapon to bear.

At her order, the Death Knights began to charge. The Calamity Moon shone down from the heavens, affording Riselia, undead herself, a vast supply of mana.

The sound of clashing weapons rode the raging winds. Under Riselia’s command, the Death Knights cut down the Voids in rapid succession. Leonis held on to the resonating Staff of Sealed Sins, removed its handle, and grabbed the grip of the Demon Sword sealed within.

Thou Art the Sword to Save the World, Gifted by the Heavens.

Thou Art the Sword to Ruin the World, Made to Rebel Against the Heavens.

A Holy Sword, Sanctified by the Gods.

A Demon Sword, Blessed by the Goddess.

Let Your Name, Submerged in Darkness, Ring Forth—

“The Demon Sword, Dáinsleif!”

The Demon Sword that had been granted a curse from the Goddess of Rebellion shone the deepest shade of ebon. The swarm of Voids faltered, and Zolgstar Mezekis, having cut its way through the Death Knights, charged at Leonis as if overtaken by madness.

“Fool. Can you not tell that you are the inferior weapon?” Leonis whispered, and he leaped up from the ground.

With Dáinsleif drawn, Leonis once again regained his sealed powers as the greatest swordsman. Zolgstar Mezekis’s eight blades barreled down, but Leonis read and intercepted each of the attacks with ease.

Leonis utilized the Rognas Kingdom school of swordsmanship; its motions were like a fluid, elegant dance. Dáinsleif stabbed into the Void Lord’s massive eyeball.

“Gwooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!”

The Void Lord’s dying scream shook the dark seas.

“Secret Blade Art of the Rognas Kingdom School—Ragna Lost!”

A surging dark light flooded into the Void Lord, eradicating it and bisecting the Void reef.

EPILOGUE

“In the end, militant cells within the empire were declared responsible for what happened to the *Hyperion*,” Leonis muttered idly.

Two days had passed since the incident. He was lying on a bed in his room at the Hræsvelgr dorm, looking down at his information terminal.

According to the report, remnants of the Sovereign Wolves group had abducted the fourth Princess and hijacked the battleship *Hyperion*. The incident received large-scale media coverage throughout the city. The published story differed from what had actually happened, of course.

After escaping the Void reef, the *Hyperion* was rescued by a fleet sent from the Seventh Assault Garden. The ringleader was recognized as Bastea Colossuf, the leader of the Sovereign Wolves, and his objective was assumed to be the kidnapping of the princess and the hijacking of the *Hyperion*.

Accounts went on to say the terrorists had lost control of the ship and made contact with a Void reef. Those same accounts further explained that the Voids that had attacked the ship ended up wiping out the assailants, while Holy Swordsmen from Excalibur Academy had seized the opportunity to retake control of the ship and escape the reef.

Leonis tapped the terminal with a finger and turned off the screen. Any information regarding the beastmen’s Demon Swords had been omitted.

I should’ve squeezed more information out of that woman.

Leonis recalled the image of the dark elf who’d given the beastmen their Demon Swords.

That woman definitely mentioned a goddess…

Surely it was the same person who’d granted Sharnak the Zolgstar Mezekis. Leonis closely examined the shard of the Demon Sword he’d collected. Most of it had been annihilated by Dáinsleif’s attack, but a few fragments had survived. Why had one of the lost Arc Seven become a Void Lord? Was it connected to how Arakael Degradios, one of the Six Heroes, had become one?

As Leonis was beginning to sink into thought, there came a knock at his door.

“…?”

It couldn’t have been Riselia; she was currently taking a shower.

“Hey, kid. I’m coming in,” declared a muffled voice. After which, Regina, clad in her maid’s uniform, entered.

“Miss Regina…”

“I came to pay you a visit.” Regina regarded Leonis with a bright smile and took a seat on the chair next to his bed. “How’re you feeling?” she asked.

“My muscles are sore, that’s all. I can’t really lift my arms yet, though…”

It was the recoil from wielding Dáinsleif. The Demon Sword drew out his strength as the ultimate swordsman and hero, but his young child’s body couldn’t bear that much power for very long. As a result, Leonis was going to have to suffer through muscle pains for a while.

“I baked you an apple pie today,” Regina said, producing the dish and some utensils from a basket she’d brought.

The scent of cinnamon and apples tickled Leonis’s nostrils, reminding him how hungry he was.

“Thank you. I appreciate it… Aah, ouch…” Leonis tried to lift his arms but winced as pain shot through his shoulders.

“Don’t overdo it. Here, I’ll feed you.” Regina gave a slightly bothered smile and cut a piece of the pie, holding it up for Leonis to eat.

“D-don’t do that. I can feed myself.”

“What, are you embarrassed? Go on, say ‘aah’…”

Left with no choice, Leonis bit into the piece Regina offered him.

“…It’s good…,” he said.

The pie’s dough was well baked, giving it a crisp yet moist texture. The sweet and sour flavors of the apples were perfectly balanced, resulting in a delightful taste that filled Leonis’s mouth. He couldn’t recall ever having sampled such a delicious apple pie, even when he’d been a normal human.

“R-really? That’s good to hear…” Regina smiled happily and offered another bite.

Beholding her lovely expression reminded Leonis of something.

“You never did end up meeting her, did you?” he asked.

At that question, Regina’s hands stopped. “…No, I didn’t.” She gave a short nod.

Princess Altiria had left the Seventh Assault Garden earlier in the afternoon, escorted by a fleet from the Integrated Empire. Apparently, Altiria had wanted to stay longer, but after the incident, she wasn’t permitted to do so.

“At least we got to speak through the spirit.” Regina gave a satisfied smile.

“I suppose that’s true,” replied Leonis.

Regina stared at the boy’s face for a long moment.

“Thank you for saving my sister,” she eventually said.

“No, I…” Leonis shook his head to refuse the expression of gratitude.

He hadn’t done it for Regina’s sake. His pride as a Dark Lord had demanded it.

“As a token of my gratitude, I’ll give you a little prize,” Regina declared.

“More candy?” Leonis asked.

“No, no. Something even better…”

Smooch. Regina planted a kiss on Leonis's cheek.

"…M-M-Miss Regina?!" Leonis went red to his ears.

"Ohhh? Did your heart just skip a beat?"

"S-stop teasing me!"

"I'm… I'm not teasing you."

Leonis looked up only to see Regina's cheeks were tinged pink.

"Just keep this a secret from Lady Selia. Okay, *Leo*?" she asked with a mischievous smile, bringing her index finger to her lips.

◆

"Was there someone here, Leo?" Riselia emerged from the bathroom, her body wrapped in a towel as she dried her silvery locks.

"Yes, Miss Regina came to pay me a vis— Could you stop prancing around in your underwear?!"

Leonis hurriedly averted his gaze.

My word. I might be a ten-year-old boy right now, but she's being too careless.

As Leonis struggled to keep himself from flushing a shade of crimson again, however…

"…Leo."

A pair of dainty arms wrapped around his body from behind.

He could feel cold fingers against his skin. Smooth, argent locks gently tickled his face.

"What's gotten into you, Miss Selia?"

"…E-erm…I…uh…," Riselia stammered bashfully.

That was all Leonis needed to understand what was going on. He shrugged. Riselia's vampiric impulses were getting the better of her. It was understandable. She had lost a lot of mana during the fight on the ship.

"Can't you restrain yourself? I swear, you're such a troublesome minion…" Leonis sighed with a playful frown.

"…Uuu… Nn…" He could feel Riselia shiver shamefully behind his back.

"…I'm joking. Feel free to drink my blood." Feeling bad for his minion, Leonis cut the teasing short.

"R-really…? May I?"

"Yes."

"A-all right, then… I'll try to take only as much as I need…"

Chomp.

Riselia embraced Leonis and sank her fangs into his neck in what felt like only a nibble.

"Mmm… Nnng…" Leonis couldn't help but let out a little moan. It didn't hurt. If anything, the pain was intoxicating.

…Bite… Bite…

Riselia was in a daze, sinking her teeth into his neck again and again.

"M-Miss… Selia…?"

"…Mmm… Moooore… *Schlurp…* Mmm… ♪ "

Her arms wrapped tight around Leonis, Riselia sweetly begged for more. Her vampiric desires were getting stronger. Leonis tilted his neck, making it easier for Riselia to suck his blood.

…I really am too kind to my minions. Leonis smiled to himself and turned his thoughts to other matters.

Voids, Holy Swords, and someone claiming to be a goddess. Could they be related to her reincarnation?

He didn't have enough information to know for sure, so the question would have to wait for later.

It's almost time for me to start making my own moves…

Leonis steeled himself. If someone was assuming *her* name…

I'll have to crush them with all of my might.

Leonis smiled indomitably and clenched his fist.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for your patience, everyone. Yu Shimizu here. This is Volume 2 of *The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy*, an academy sword fantasy that tells the story of a ten-year-old Dark Lord and the older girls who help him!

This volume added quite a few new concepts. Spirits, Demon Swords, the Integrated Empire… There are still many mysteries to unravel in this world, and how Leonis faces the truth of those enigmas is where the fun comes in!

Incidentally, the character adorning the cover art this time is our favorite combat maid, Regina. Her name actually means xxxxx in Latin. (Censored for spoiler purposes.) Anyone who's interested is welcome to look into it after finishing the volume!

Now then, this book mainly takes place on a large imperial battleship docked in the Seventh Assault Garden. It's more than just a battleship, though—it's also a personal ship of the royal family, so its interior is that of an extravagant passenger vessel.

To scope out what such a ship would look like, I went cruising with a few author friends of mine on a luxury liner (for research purposes, of course). The ship had a pool, a movie theater, a concert hall, a game center, a library, a bar, and even a casino (not that I could gamble). I had a lot of fun (despite definitely going there for research purposes).

So as you can see, Volume 2 was written with a lot of studying done beforehand, so I hope you all like it. This series is enjoying great success. It's actually startling how well it's selling. (We got three requests for a second-edition printing before Volume 2 even came out!)

I also have a bit of good news! A manga version for this series has been announced, with Asuka Keigen handling the art! Leonis, Riselia, and the rest of the eighteenth platoon will be starring in a manga adaptation, and it's all because of your support as readers. Thank you very, very much! I'll be working hard to make this an even bigger work with a living, breathing story, and lots of twists. I hope you will continue to support us going forward.

Now, time for some thanks. To Asagi Tosaka, thank you for drawing the wonderful cover art as well as the adorable insert pictures! All the illustrations were delicate, cute, and so pretty that I can't help but sigh in appreciation. I hope we continue to work together well into the future.

I'm sure I caused plenty of grief for this book's designers, proofreaders, my editor in chief, and the other editors in charge of my work during the process of writing this volume. Once again, I extend my thanks to all of you.

But the greatest thank-you goes to you, readers!

Let’s meet in the next volume! Volume 3 is set to be a turning point, and I plan to really pile on the plot.

—Yu Shimizu, August 2019

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